

## Fear of the Unknown

“Fear Not: What the Bible Says to our Fears” Sermon Series

Matthew 14:22-33

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January 21, 2018

There is an old John Updike short story entitled “Trust Me” that begins with the protagonist, a man named Harold, remembering a moment from his childhood, a primal scene that has played out in generations and generations of childhoods. Harold is three or four years old, at the local pool with his parents. He is standing shivering at the tiled edge, while his father is treading water in the chlorinated pool below, urging him to jump in, saying, “It’ll be all right. Jump right into my hands.”

And though Harold feels afraid and exposed, and cannot yet swim, he does as his father says, and leaves the safety of the tile and jumps into the pool and here’s the thing: his father does not catch Harold.

Updike writes, *There was blue-green water all around him, and when he tried to take a breath it was as if a fist was being*

*shoved into his throat. He saw his own bubbles rising in front of this face, a multitude of them, rising as he went down. He went down it seemed for a very long time, until something found him and pulled him back into air.*

Harold is fine, plucked back out of the water to safety. Years later, as an adult, he asks his father about it. And I quote:

*“Wasn’t that a crying shame,” the old man said, with his mild mixture of mournfulness and comedy. “Sink or swim, and you sank.” Maybe Harold had jumped a moment before it was expected, or had proved unexpectedly heavy, and had slipped through his father’s grasp.*

Lately, I feel as if the whole world is like Harold, standing on the edge of the pool, waiting to jump into a great, yawning, unknown future. Everything feels unpredictable and alien and, yes, frightening.

If and when we jump, will strong and trustworthy arms catch us, or not? Will we sink or swim?

As we focused this week on fear of the unknown, it seemed right to me to read the old tale of Jesus walking on water, and to read Matthew's take in particular. You see, a version of the story appears in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but Matthew is the only one to include the detail of Peter *also* walking on water to meet him.

This twist caught the attention of followers of Jesus from the very beginning. In fact, one of the earliest surviving images we have of Jesus, from a fresco in the baptistry of a third-century Syrian church, shows Jesus and Peter, standing on the waves like two dancers greeting each other on the dance floor, their hands clasped almost confidently above their heads.

Let's step into the story for a minute. It's very strange. Jesus has just performed the miracle of loaves and fishes, and also cured a bunch of sick people. And what does he do next? He immediately makes all his disciples get into a boat without him while he goes up the mountain to pray. While they are out there, in the middle of the sea, a terrible storm hits. In the early hours of the morning, Jesus waltzes across the water to join them.

Now, it's important to know that in the ancient Near East, the sea was considered a source of power and chaos and potential evil. So it is not at all irrational, based on their cosmology, for the disciples to assume that the figure headed their way is not their Savior, but a phantom.

Sometimes I don't think we give the disciples enough credit. No wonder they are frightened out of their minds. Jesus has literally, not metaphorically, led them into the great unknown for no obvious reason.

"Come!" bids Jesus, looking eerily calm in the water, and Peter, the only one in the boat who was not so terrified by the whole scene as to shut down entirely, steps out onto the water, apparently goes a distance, then gets freaked by the wind, loses his nerve, and sinks. Except not all the way, because Jesus catches him. And then Jesus says, with infinite compassion, and perhaps a mixture of mournfulness and rueful humor, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Echoes of Harold's father: *Wasn't that a crying shame...*  
*Sink or swim, and you sank.*

Do you remember the moment you learned how to swim? The sensation of finally achieving buoyancy? The British psychotherapist Adam Phillips tells of a ten-year-old boy who eventually figured it out after being terrified of the water. The child said, “I finally learned that I didn’t need to stand only where I could still touch bottom. I learned that I was safer out of my depth, because even though I couldn’t stand, there was more water to hold me up.”

*There was more water to hold me up.*

The child learned that he could *float*. He learned that the water, which had always seemed so threatening, would actually hold him up once he was able to entrust himself to it.

Isn’t that a perfect demonstration of the paradox of faith?

The heart of swimming is that you can float. We have to discover that the water will hold us. But we can only figure that out if we stop flailing, stop thrashing, stop relying only our own power.

We must take what feels like a terrible risk, and let go and let the water do its work.

Likewise, the heart of having faith is that you can trust in God to hold you. But we can only figure that out if we stop calculating, stop judging (ourselves and others), stop rationalizing everything, stop relying only on our own power. We must take what feels like a terrible risk, and let go and let the Holy do its work.

And here's the really tricky part: God's way of working does not always look like our way; which means that, no matter how faithful we are, we may still hit the water and go under, struggling for breath, like Harold, like Peter.

I've been there. I've hit the water, hard, a number of times. Losses, traumas, dark nights of the soul. I know many of you have, too.

But listen closely: Jesus says, "Take heart; It is I; do not be afraid."

“It is I”. This language, linguistically, is related to other places in the Scriptures where the Holy One identifies Itself as “I AM.” This is how God answers Moses when Moses asks, “What is your name?” God’s name is a verb, an action, an act of creation that harkens back the symbolic language of Genesis. God is life, relentless and unstoppable, even in the deep and stormy waters of death. In Jewish mysticism, wooden clubs were even inscribed with the words “I Am,” because the clubs were symbols of the Divine Presence that was powerful enough to beat back storms. Those are the words that Matthew puts in Jesus’ mouth.

*That* is the promise of today’s Gospel story: that even when we are thrashing in the water, indeed, even if, God forbid, we drown in the sea, *God is still bigger than the sea*. God is bigger than the sea, God is bigger than the past, God is bigger than the future. Fear of the unknown may frighten us, but the mystery of God can and will overwhelm that fear with the love that passes all understanding.

These ancient images and metaphors, if allow ourselves to really dive deep into them, can change the way we move through the world, the ways we think and act, even the way we dream. I

had a dream last night that I was a teenager again, sitting in the backseat of my father's green Toyota Corolla, my father in the driver's seat and my mother in the front passenger seat, and I'm looking at the backs of their heads. A very familiar scene from my childhood. And we're driving into a large city, and entering a tunnel full of bumper to bumper traffic.

And all of a sudden, in my dream, a deep and dark water, like the waters of the ocean, suddenly fills the tunnel. The water comes right up to the windows of our car and all the cars around us, and somehow we keep moving forward, driving yet floating, but I can sense that the metal and glass of our car won't be enough to hold the water back, that soon it will rush in and envelop us.

Here's the thing though: this wasn't a nightmare. This wasn't a dream about drowning. I wasn't scared. Even though the waters were pressing in, even though in waking life my father has long since passed from this earth, somehow, in my dream, I felt—if not safe, then curious, open, ready, waiting for *whatever* was coming next. And when I woke, it wasn't in a panic, but in a state of trust. And I was reminded that faithful trust is possible.

So, let's remember Jesus' words to his friends, and to us: take heart. Take heart. And instead of sinking or swimming, how about floating instead? How about praying for the grace to thrive beyond the margins of your fear? "It is I" — these are words meant for you, even if you hear them without fully understanding, even if they summon a trust from you that you think you cannot afford.

Take, also, the risk of faith. To take this risk is to accept that safety is an illusion. But with that awareness comes, I think, a parallel insight: that even if we are not always totally out of danger, we are always totally, fiercely held, and loved.

I think that's a risk worth taking.

Amen.