

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **“You’re gonna have to ask yourself”, he said to me with a pointed edge in his voice...”is this the hill you’re willing to die on?”** Some of you have heard me describe this moment before - a moment where I was being clearly challenged to choose a side, to take a stand, to accept a firm consequence to a choice I was making.
1. The choice in question: **would I continue to challenge the system I was a part of?**
Would I challenge this network of churches I had called my spiritual home for decades and had always assumed I’d live out my faith and my vocation in as a pastor and church-starter? Specifically, would I challenge that network’s ethic on LGBTQ inclusion and insist that the church I was going to start would be a church for folks of every gender and every orientation to be included as full participants and leaders?
 2. Or would I relent? Would I repent? Would I submit to this man’s authority and the leadership structure he represented? To submit, to relent, to agree to this organization’s stance of exclusion, to deny that queer and trans bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made and affirmed by God just as they are - this meant I could stay. To challenge, to dissent, to choose to affirm my LGBTQ brothers and sisters, this meant choosing separation. Choosing rejection from this place of home. Choosing to be cut off from my whole network and base of support. Choosing something with consequences to this man as stark and irrevocable as choosing to die on a hill. **What logic could there possibly be to make that choice? How foolish would I have to be to make it?**
- B. Well at this point, we are **well into a teaching series on stories from the life of Jesus**; a series we’re calling the “Stories that Sustain Us”. In this series we’re looking at the four gospels to consider together what they tell us about the person of Jesus they are proclaiming, and how these stories and this Jesus in the center of them might bring sustenance to us in this challenging season we’re continuing to endure.
- C. Thus far, we’ve looked at stories from Luke, Mark and John, so today we’ll turn to our fourth gospel writer, Matthew, as he shares with us a story about Jesus and his followers in the midst of challenging circumstances, and explores how they find themselves responding. My hope is that it will be instructive to us in some of the places we feel challenged, too.
- D. Let’s start by considering the setup:
1. Jesus has been attracting attention, thanks in no small part to a number of the miracles he’s done, healing people, etc.
 2. But the experiences haven’t all been positive. Jesus hasn’t been warmly received in his hometown of Nazareth. We saw Luke’s version of that story a couple of weeks ago.
 3. Then Jesus gets the news that his cousin, John, the one who has been baptizing and working prophetically in line with what Jesus was doing, he has been executed. Beheaded by the very political leader he felt called to challenge. Jesus withdraws to grieve, trying to pull away from the mounting crowds, but the crowds find him. He is beginning to be pursued by them relentlessly.
 4. So when the crowds discover Jesus, bringing him their sick, he looks on them with compassion and heals them. After a long day of healing, as the day is winding down and there’s no food nearby, he does something equally amazing and feeds the multitudes with just a few bread and fish. And after all of that, Matthew then turns to the story we’re looking at today:

II. Matthew 14

- A. **22 Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,**

24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

28 Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

- B. So this is another famous story that many people who know very little about the Gospels or Jesus-centered faith have at least heard of: Jesus walked on water. We even use this phrase sometimes to describe someone that people really look up to or think can do no wrong - like a Messiah it's joked that those people can walk on water.
- C. But beyond the amazing idea that Jesus could do such a surprising thing, what does this story tell us about who Jesus was and how he related to his followers? We're going delve into those questions by looking at this story in three parts: where Jesus is and what he's doing as the story begins, what we see when Jesus approaches the boat, and what happens between Jesus and Peter on the water.
- D. First, let's consider the story's set up. **What Jesus is up to at the beginning of our story.**
1. Jesus has been delaying his alone time for a while, and now he knows he needs it. Matthew says Jesus compelled his followers to go on without him. He was insistent. Much as he loved them, he needed time alone, even alone from his closest companions.
 - a) And it wasn't just time alone for a nap or to watch some Netflix or play video games. Jesus was spending the time in prayer. Clearly it was a restorative, life-giving practice for him.
 2. **Before Jesus did the miraculous, he took the time he needed to connect with the Divine.**
 - a) The gospels are filled with stories that reflect this pattern - Jesus is present to the crowds, preaching with authority and performing miraculous signs and wonders and then he withdraws to pray. Before he selects the twelve followers who will be his closest disciples, he spends time in prayer. And here, after he's experienced the grief of his hometown visit and losing his cousin, and after he's put himself out there doing miracle after miracle, he knows he can't put off his time alone with the Divine any longer.
 - b) While none of us are Jesus, I think there's something about his commitment to his personal devotional life that is meant to be instructive for us. His followers understood as much, which is why at one point after he'd been busy in prayer they approached him and asked him to teach them how to pray, which is the origin of what we call the Lord's prayer.
 3. Throughout this pandemic year, **all of us have heard a lot of talk and encouragement regarding self care**, and I don't know about you, but at some point while I agree that self-care is important, there are also limits to what it can accomplish for us. I've found myself at times hearing someone tell me to take a moment for self care, you know, what I really

need right now is to hang out with my friends, no screens involved, and share a meal, what I really need right now is for my kids to go to school, what I really need is to hang out at a coffee shop and people watch but I can't do any of those things - so what is one more nature walk or one more bubble bath really gonna accomplish? But what we see here with Jesus, I think, is a call to something beyond our top layer coping mechanisms or the self-soothing practices our various mental health professionals are recommending. **Jesus is tapping into a deeper spiritual connectedness, a deeper source of replenishment and strength**, one that is present with us in the darker places in our lives, when we've lost someone we love or we feel depleted from pressing concerns on every side.

4. One specific part of Jesus' devotional life I've been reflecting on the week is his way of addressing God as if God were an intimate loving parent. **He used the term Abba for the Divine** - a term that the New Testament writers leave untranslated from the Aramaic because they understand the uniqueness of it - it's a pet name that imagines God as a close Father. It's a name of intimacy. We might say Daddy. Or Mommy is great too. The gender isn't what's most important, rather it's the intimate immediacy Jesus is calling on when he prays to Abba. He's not connecting with the Divine as a transcendent force of love filling all things, though of course God is that. But Jesus understands the finite mind needs more finite conceptions of the Divine, and so **he connects in this personal way with the loving parent who cares for him, who's available to him, who sees him and is there for him when he's in need.**
5. I know that all of us are so over this Covid reality. We all just want it to be done so badly. I feel like in recent weeks we've hit another collective wall - or maybe it's just me. I recently had the realization that it's been almost a year since I've worshiped alongside other people and heard them sing with me, and I still desperately miss that way of connecting with God. I realize that this way of connecting with God has been a core part of my spiritual vitality for more than twenty years, most of my experience of faith. And we haven't done it in almost a year, and I feel the cost. I feel weary. I feel depleted. And I recognize that even in my weariness, more than ever I need to find fresh ways of being nourished by my divine parent, of being cared for by a sacred heart that sees me and loves me deeply, just as a parent giving care to a young child. **I need to acknowledge my need before God and allow my loving parent to care for me in that place.**
6. **We're getting ready to begin this week the season of Lent, a time the church has often set aside for deeper spiritual reflection and connection with the life of Jesus in the roughly 40 days before Easter.** Often Christians include in that season a practice of deprivation - a fast, perhaps from a certain food, perhaps from certain practices like watching tv or being on Facebook. The hope is that the setting aside of those comforts reminds us to lean on God in our places of dependency. This year, I think we've all been living in deprivation for a while. I'm not sure we need to take on a fast, we're already fasting in a sense from so much, but perhaps in this season, this Lent our invitation is to acknowledge our places of depletion, and allow them to be invitations for renewed intimacy with God. **So to help with that, this Lent we're going to be inviting all of us into a series of spiritual and creative experiences on Sunday, and outside of Sundays, all with the hopes that they might give us fresh tools to connect more deeply with our source**, with our divine caregiver however we envision them, to receive the refueling we need, as well as the vision and empowerment that will be necessary for the next series of challenging things we are called to. I hope you'll join us in that journey,

both through the Sundays in Lent, as well as through other experiences we'll offer you to try during the week.

7. So we see Jesus connecting with his Divine parent alone, while his followers take a boat ride to cross the Sea of Galilee. And as we see, they are having a very different experience. Let's review what Matthew told us:

E. Matthew described it this way:

1. ***by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."***
2. So while Jesus has been having his lovely alone time with God, **the disciples have been fighting to keep the boat afloat on a stormy sea.** They're now pretty far out from shore and they're struggling to keep themselves from going under. After hours of struggle that undoubtedly feels futile and overwhelming, in the wee hours of the morning, the disciples see Jesus appear to them, walking on the water, and they're understandably afraid. They think they're being haunted by a ghost, but Jesus consoles them. **"Take heart" he says.** Cheer up. It's ok. It's me.
3. Our English translation masks something unique about what Jesus says next, but it's likely something early readers of the gospels would have noticed, particularly those from a Jewish background who were familiar with the Hebrew Bible.
4. **When the disciples look to Jesus in fear he tells them in Greek "Ego eimi."** Most translations say this in English as "It is I." But the actual words are more stark. **I Am.** They're the same words that the Jewish people believe God used to describe himself to Moses - the words behind the Hebrew name Yahweh. I am. In Greek, *Ego eimi*.
5. To respond in this way to those battered disciples in the boat, **Jesus is affirming something particular about himself in that moment.** Just as the Divine had been drawing close to him, giving him what he needed, Jesus was now embodying that same Divine spirit for his followers. This brings me to the second thing I want to take note of from our story for us to consider today:

F. **God comes to us in the places where our sufficiency fails.**

1. Remember, **most of these disciples were fisherman by trade.** They know how to handle a boat. Being in a boat on the sea of Galilee is their place of stability and knowledge. It's the place where generally they know how to perform well, the system that works for them. They can use the skills they've cultivated since boyhood. But in this story, these fishermen who've likely spent many days and nights of their life on this very body of water - this night they are confronting their own limitations to care for themselves with those same skills. **The storm is just too big. These fisherman are forced to recognize that their sense of control and capacity were simply an illusion.** In the place where their capacity fails them, this is where they need to encounter Jesus, the embodiment of the Living God pursuing them.
2. This is another challenging truth that I think we're all invited to consider. **What are the places where we are recognizing the limitations of our own capacities? What are the places where we are recognizing the limitations of the systems and structures that we may have thought were working for us?** Particularly those of us who are white, those of us who are able-bodied, who are educated, who are cisgender and straight, those

of us who are male, those of us with relative wealth, with job security - all of those areas of privilege may have shielded us at times from a sense of vulnerability.

3. But **then bigger forces come our way**, forces that challenge even those areas of security and control we seem to have cultivated. When these forces batter our little boats with crashing waves, one after another, **we're forced to reckon with our own fragility**. With the limitations of our systems and our own capacities. **And we're invited to look for the Divine coming in mysterious ways towards us where everything else is breaking down.**
4. "Take heart", Jesus tells his followers. "Ego eimi." **"Take heart", Jesus tells us. "I am."**
5. **The abolitionist and suffragette Sojourner Truth had a question that was printed on her headstone.** It was a question that many who knew her and appreciated the work she'd committed herself to, the work of ending chattel slavery in the United States, as well as advocating for the right for women to vote, saw as core to who she was and what kept her in the fight for freedom and justice. It was a question she had first posed, when she attended a lecture by abolitionist Frederick Douglass in Boston in 1847.
6. In his speech, Frederick Douglass was beyond discouraged. That night, to a packed crowd he gave his most pessimistic speech. As he passionately spoke out against the evils of slavery he lamented his growing conviction that the white people of America would never bring an end to the institution. There was only one answer, Douglas argued, and that was an armed revolt by the slaves themselves, which would likely result in wholesale slaughter.
 - a) As the crowd sat in stunned silence at this idea, a deep, resonant voice rung out in the Hall, the voice of a former slave herself who had also joined the effort to organize and advocate for abolition. "Frederick, is God dead?" Sojourner Truth asked. A question that caught the speaker off guard but that he was forced to take to heart.
 - b) **"Is God dead?" Was Sojourner Truth's central question, the question that would later be written on her headstone.** When we feel we've reached the limits of our own capacity, or the limits of the structures we are a part of, is that the end? Is that really what we believe? Can we entrust ourselves to nothing else? Is God dead? Or are these places where we reach the limits of our own capacity, and even our own imagination, the places we must encounter the Divine who is still living and present with us?
Because if God is not dead, if our loving parent is present, if the Divine is walking on water to us and saying "take heart," "I am", how can we give up hope?

G. Well **Jesus' word of encouragement lands in a particular way in the heart of Peter, who responds unlike any other.**

1. Not only does Peter take heart encountering Jesus, he boldly feels drawn to join him in the place of impossibility, walking on the water. "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you onto the water."
2. Now **some people see this request as a skeptical challenge to Jesus**, that Peter is daring Jesus to prove it's really him doing the impossible. But I think his request is more sincere than that, and more audacious.
3. Author and teacher Rob Bell has pointed out that in considering what Peter is doing here, it's helpful to consider some context from the ancient world he inhabited. **Peter has been called to be a disciple of Jesus, and this is not a casual relationship.** In ancient Israel, in Jesus time, to be invited by a rabbi to be a disciple was something like getting a scholarship to Harvard. It meant something significant. It didn't happen to many people. It meant that a Rabbi saw something in you that was worth cultivating. The rabbi was

inviting you not just to do some torah lessons but to travel with him, to live alongside him, to follow him in an intimate way so that you would not only learn his approach to the torah, to your sacred texts, but you could become like him.

4. This has now happened to Peter and his friends. **This strange rabbi has seen something in them, something most of their peers couldn't see.** The very qualities that made them unique, likely would have turned other rabbis away; those rabbis would no doubt have given their scholarships to "better students", who "fit the culture", but not Jesus of Nazareth. This rabbi called Peter and his fisherman friends forward, inviting them not to become biblical scholars, but to become "fishers of people".
5. So now, this man who had just recently been known as Simon the fisherman, is in the midst of a life reorientation. He is becoming Peter the disciple of Jesus. He is leaving the safety of the nets and the boats to learn the way of this strange rabbi who is unlike any other teacher any of them have ever encountered before. And now in this moment this teacher is standing outside his boat, in the place he's always understood you can't go. A fisherman knows that to walk outside the boat in the midst of a storm is a suicide mission. **But perhaps with this Jesus present, with this *I am* in his midst, inviting him to become like himself, what was once impossible, reckless, foolish might now be the place of ultimate encounter with the Divine.**
6. Jesus affirms Peter's request with a simple invitation, "come". And with that, Peter steps outside the boat. He finds himself walking on the water, making his way toward Jesus.
7. In recent weeks I have been reflecting on this story and **the richness of this imagery of walking on water.** Truthfully, I think many of us, when we consider our journey of faith or what it means to engage spirituality, we can connect with this moment of leaving the boat. Some of us were brought up in churches where faith was understood to be secure and certain. We were told we had solid ground underneath us, or a protective boat we could ride in if we encountered choppy waters. Others of us may have found that security in our families, our education, or some other system that helped us make sense of the world. But eventually we've found ourselves called out of the boat, compelled by something beyond the safety of our vessel. Taking fearful steps onto what feels like it has no foundation - like it's as unstable as water. This brings me to my third and final observation from this passage.
8. **The journey of faith often involves taking steps into uncertainty, but also sacred solidarity.**
 - a) What do I mean by that?
 - b) I'm struck by the **fragility we can feel in moments where we are called to step out,** where it feels like we're no longer on solid ground, where that which we always assumed we needed to make our way forward has been stripped away. We move from certainty to ambiguity, from clarity to mystery, and it's destabilizing. If we look too closely at the forces coming against us, or own lack of capacity, we might find ourselves, like Peter starting to sink.
 - c) **But Peter doesn't drown.** Something holds him up. He is connected to his rabbi, Jesus. He's experiencing solidarity with the sacred. Even when he starts to falter, when he loses trust in himself and his ability to take this journey, all he needs to do is cry out and Jesus is present and ready to accompany him.
9. When that man asked me pointedly, "is this the hill you're willing to die on?" **I knew there was only one answer I could really give.** Because this journey of faith I was on was not ultimately defined by a persuasive theological argument, or by my sense of this leader's

authority in my life. I was now **years into a journey of following a rabbi who had seen something particular in this young woman**, this quirky theatre major, with all of her gay friends and gay professors whom she loved and respected, and called me to be a disciple. Even in a faith context that was not affirming, I was years into wrestling with the clear sense that Jesus' radical way of inclusion meant fully embracing, affirming and including our LGBTQ family members. I had been moved by visions of Jesus embracing my queer friends before an altar and calling me to cultivate sacred space where those friends could find a safe home to receive Jesus' loving embrace. And when it became clear that my now deep conviction might cause tension with the leadership of my network, I found myself devoutly praying for guidance and wisdom. And so I told that leader the truth. **"I'm praying every day, if I'm in error, Jesus show me. But all I sense is Jesus calling me forward. And so if that means dying on a hill, then I guess that's what it means."**

a) Stepping out of the system of churches I was part of, and the Christian subculture that network was connected to **was for me like stepping out of the boat of security. I was taking steps onto something that felt as slippery and unstable as water.** But what called me forward, and what encouraged me through the myriad moments of uncertainty and fear in the weeks and years that have followed, **has been sacred solidarity.** First and foremost it has been a sense of solidarity with the Divine that I have seen expressed through the person of Jesus and the Spirit that he has pointed me towards. But this is not the only place sacred solidarity has shown up for me. I've seen it in the discovery of many other brothers and sisters from across the spectrum who've taken similar journeys, have felt similar calls, and are moved by God in similar ways, demonstrating to me that **what I feared might be a journey into isolation was actually an invitation into deeper sacred community.** This community includes all of you but, the expression of sacred solidarity, reaches beyond the boundaries of Haven, or of any particular expression of Christian faith. It reminds me that I am in solidarity with a long line of ancestors, a great cloud of witnesses, who since the time of Peter, have taken courage from this same story and others like it, **and have made choices to get out of their boats. My walk on the water is in solidarity with all of them.**

10. Friends, as we enter this season of Lent, alongside Christian family members throughout history, and many from traditions very different from our own, I hope **we too can experience some of that sacred solidarity at this time, and that it can be sustaining for us.** May we, like Jesus, be nourished by a loving parent in our places of desperation and depletion. May we, when we see the limits of our own sufficiency find the one who says, "I am" present with us. And **may we have the courage to follow the sacred outside the boat.** Because we may stumble at times, we may struggle to trust and start to sink, but as we continue to move forward, even in uncertainty to the places where sacred solidarity is calling us, **the miraculous can happen.** We too might just walk on water. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What practices have been helpful for you in refilling and connecting with the Divine when you've been depleted?
2. Are there areas in your life right now where you are becoming aware of the limits of your own capacity or imagination? What might it mean to experience God present with you in those spaces?
3. Where have you felt "called out of the boat"? What has that journey been like?