

## Stepping Out

Matthew 14: 22-33

Aug 13, 2023

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

### *Matthew 14: 22-33*

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

--

*What if God was one of us?*

*Just a slob like one of us*

*Just a stranger on the bus*

*Tryin' to make his way home*

*Just tryin' to make his way home<sup>i</sup>*

In 1995 Joan Osborne's debut song 'One of Us' was a wildly successful hit and a polarizing controversy. Some praised the song for being "spiritual and sacrilegious—a songwriting feat." Others were offended by the idea of eternity contained in mortality, by the idea of the divine Creator being reduced to just some unknown, dull, ordinary, lazy guy drifting along on public transportation.

The song, which asks questions such as:

*-If God had a name, what would it be?*

*-What would you ask if you had just one question?*

*-If God had a face, what would it look like?*

*And would you want to see*

*If seeing meant that you would have to believe*

*In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the saints*

*And all the prophets?,<sup>ii</sup>*

was intend not as a religious song, but rather to provoke critical thinking.

Those are questions that do indeed make us wonder. Can we recognize God in the face of an unhoused man sleeping against the wall of a major city bus terminal? Can we recognize God

in the face of an exhausted, unkempt single mother napping on the bus in between two of her low paying jobs? Can we recognize God in someone regardless of their name and culture?

And with all the cares and concerns that break the heart of the world, and with all of the countless joys and blessings that God lavishly offers, what would you say if you had a chance to sit down with God and ask one single question?

What does God's face look like? How would you know if you saw God, especially if you are not expecting to see God. As Christians, we also ask:

Who is Jesus?

What does he look like?

If you met him on the street, on the bus, would you know him?

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus' own disciples, the ones who were with him day and night for a few years, had an experience of struggling to recognize him.

Jesus, in a time of self-care, in grief, in sadness, after the brutal death of John the Baptist, has some important time to himself, time to pray, time to rest, on the mountain in the darkness of the night. The disciples sail away across the Sea of Galilee. An intense storm arises during the night, not an unusual weather phenomenon in that region. The wind whipped around them and the boat was tossed by waves as though they were on the ocean. The experienced fishermen struggled all night not to capsize, not to go overboard. On the fourth watch of the night, somewhere between 3am and 6am, as dawn's light first began to glimmer through the darkened stormy skies, the disciples think that they actually see someone coming to them on the water, see someone walking across the waves.

In their exhaustion, they are confused and terrified to see a ghost coming towards them, easily walking on the storm as though it were the shore.

But immediately the 'ghost,' Jesus spoke to them. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Take heart, be courageous, do not be afraid. It is I.

As the disciples must make sense of seeing Jesus walk on water, on seeing someone they did not recognize and perceived to be a ghost, Peter, as Peter often does, responds with words and actions that seem strange, even inappropriate, and now he boldly acts in a way that seems reckless.

Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Peter does not ask how or why Jesus is walking on the raging sea.

He does not ask Jesus to still the storm as Jesus had done once before.

Peter immediately shifts from thinking that Jesus is a ghost to asking him--perhaps even daring him-- to risk his life by joining him in the absolutely impossible walk on the water.

Peter did not recognize Jesus by sight, but he knew his voice, his style and tone of calming reassurance. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Later John's gospel will offer this same way of recognizing Jesus by his voice. The Good Shepherd promises, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."<sup>iii</sup>

William Willimon<sup>iv</sup> calls us to notice that "We began this gospel story, with Jesus calling a group of very ordinary people to drop their fishing nets, to leave their families to venture forth with him on a perilous sea called discipleship.

First, he said to us, "I'm going to teach you to catch people." And then as we go on the journey with him, he said, "Now, I'm going to teach you to carry a cross."

Why then should we find it strange for one of those people now to say, "Lord, if it is you, call me to get out of the boat and to walk on the waves"?

Jesus used every possible opportunity to be a teaching moment for his disciples, for those he healed, and the crowds he taught. Peter’s audacious attempt to join him on the water is one more of those opportunities. Jesus did not call Peter to successfully walk but to fall, to fail, to sink, to know that in his vulnerability he is not alone.

In *Seeds of Heaven*, Barbara Brown Taylor<sup>v</sup> asks, “What if Peter had not sunk? What if he jumped out of the boat with perfect confidence, landed with both feet flat on the water and smiled across the waves at Jesus? What if the other disciples had followed suit, piling out of the boat after him? It would be a different story. It might even be a better story, but it would not be a story about us.”

The boat that Peter stepped out of was caught in the chaos of the storm, yet it was still a safer place than the stormy sea. We all have safe places in our lives—home, church, places in our community—yet they too are never perfectly safe. There are times of storms and chaos and upheaval. But they are still our safe spaces despite their flaws.

Jesus calls us, invites us, extends his hand to us, so that we too boldly dare to get out of our safe spaces and risk sinking into our vulnerability, our limitations, our ignorance, to step out into the challenges and needs beyond the comfort and security of our walls of safety.

An old hymn says that Jesus calls us *over* the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea, day by day his sweet voice saying, “Christian, follow me.”<sup>vi</sup> But Jesus doesn’t just call us *over* or *out of* the tumult. Jesus call us *into* the tumult so that we can see and recognize his face as well as his voice. Jesus call us into the tumult so that we can see him in the face of everyone, can hear his voice in different accents, can extend our hand to those in need and walk with him.

If you met Jesus, would you know him? Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://genius.com/Joan-osborne-one-of-us-lyrics>, written by Eric Bazilian

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> John 10:27

<sup>iv</sup> <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20025fe/view>

<sup>v</sup> Brown Taylor, Barbara, ‘The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew,’ Westminster John Knox Press, 2004

<sup>vi</sup> Jesus Calls Us O’er the Tumult. Lyrics by Cecil F. Alexander