



One summer when I was about 14, I rented a small boat and went out sailing. It was nothing new for me. In fact, I owned a nearly identical boat at the time. My family had a home overlooking San Diego Bay, where my mom still lives, and I had spent many summers out on the water. I could even walk to the marina. It was only about a mile away.

What was different this time was that we were in Hawaii. The familiar and protective environment of the bay was gone. Nothing came between me and thousands of miles of ocean. It was fun for a while. It was a sunny day. There was a stiff breeze that made the boat go really fast.

The water was warm and clear. Then the wind started to pick up, and it changed direction. Soon, my boat was being driven away from the shore. I could barely control where I was going. I was being pushed out into much deeper water, and so I began to get afraid. Now, it's possible to sail a boat like that against the wind, moving back and forth at a forty-five-degree angle or so.

You can get it where it needs to go. Sailors do it all the time. I'd done it myself countless times before, but that was back at home in the relative safety of the harbor. In a small boat, in a high wind, there is a good chance of capsizing, and this time I was more than a mile from the shore. Needless to say, I was terrified, and though I was a good enough sailor to make it back in one piece, I didn't go out again that whole summer.

I'd like to be able to say that I prayed, that I called out to God, and God delivered me, but the truth is, I don't remember. I was too busy sailing the boat. It's only in hindsight that I can give God the glory. Today's gospel is not about boats and wind. It isn't even primarily a miracle story, though I do believe Jesus walked on the water.

Like most stories in the gospels, what is important here is Jesus showing himself as the Son of God. Today, we see him walking on the water just as God's Spirit hovered over the face of the deep. We see him stilling the storm just like God did when God beat

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back the chaos on the third day of creation, when God divided the waters from the dry land.

"Take heart," says Jesus.

"Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."

More is happening here than meets the eye. Jesus is doing something more typical of John's gospel, where he says things like "I am the bread of life," "I am the good shepherd," or "I am the way and the truth and the life." Jesus is alluding to the divine name, a name so holy and so powerful that many people refuse to pronounce it out loud.

Jesus is using the name revealed from the burning bush. It is I, Ego Emi. He is repeating the name of the liberator God of the Exodus. He is naming himself as the great I Am. Matthew's gospel is all about Jesus. He is our Emmanuel, God with us in the flesh. And the boat is an ancient symbol of the church.

That's why we sometimes call the room that we are in, the place where we gather for worship, a nave, like navy or nautical. It's a word that means boat or ship. In today's gospel, so long as Jesus is out of the boat, his disciples struggle against an adverse wind. But when he gets there, when he finally gets there, everything changes.

By his presence, by his grace, Jesus helps us to overcome whatever it is that makes us afraid. In the end, He conquers death itself so that nothing can keep us from His love. When we baptize someone, we baptize a little child or maybe an adult; one of the things we say about that baptism is that we have been immersed into the death and resurrection of Jesus, that we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit as Christ's own forever.

The link between Jesus and us cannot be broken, no matter what the world brings our way. In today's gospel, Jesus is assuring us that He is with us, that we do not need to be afraid. Now, I don't know about you, but my fears are different than when I was a child. Over time, my faith has grown, but so have my fears. I'm more aware of everything that can go wrong. I've had to handle bigger and bigger challenges now that I'm grown.

My fears have never really gone away, but now I do know, at least sometimes I do, how to face these fears faithfully. The objects of my fears have also changed. I am less

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self-centered than I once was. Now I worry more about Tracy and Rachel and Danny, about all of you and the other people I love. I am learning, sometimes by hard experience, to trust Jesus, who is good and generous and kind.

I am learning to have more faith in Him, for He is able to keep His promises, and He has shown me again and again that He will do it. I am reminded every day that I am on a journey. We all are. It means that we have not yet perfectly embraced God's love, which casts out all fear, but more and more we are learning to trust the Lord.

More and more we are learning to be available for His Spirit. I'll admit it, though, I'm more than capable of holding out on God. Do it all the time. The Lord is faithful even when I am not, and what I am learning is what it means to put my life in God's hands. A couple of years ago, for a class assignment, I read a short article that has helped me to do that. It is by Father Robert Marsh, and the title is *Teaching Spiritual Direction as if God Were Real*. One phrase Marsh writes became something of a mantra for me during my theology studies. "How would I do this if I believed God were real?"

By this I meant theology, but I also included all the other things I did as a Jesuit priest at the time. Preach, preside at the Eucharist, give spiritual direction. How would I do all of those things and more besides if I believed that God were really real? And by real, he continues, I meant present, interested, involved, available for real interaction, and more than that, initiating, acting, relating, desiring, and responding.

Pick your verb. In many ways, this sums up my own experience with God. It encapsulates what God has been trying to teach me. I'm stubborn, but God keeps trying to teach me over the last fifty-seven years or so, for thirty-five of which I have aspired to follow Jesus. For me, prayer means paying attention to God.

With or without words, we pay attention to God, and I'm here to tell you, is really real. In prayer, we turn to the God of grace who is always already with us. In prayer, we turn to the God of love who is always already at work.

Listen again to the words of the Apostle Paul. He is quoting Deuteronomy, "Truly the Word," that is to say Jesus, "is near us."

He is always near us. He is on our lips. He is in our hearts. With Jesus in our lives, we can face our fears. More than that, we can do impossible things. Like Peter, we can step out and meet him on the waves. True, Peter does start to sink. We all do that. Like all of us, Peter has only a little faith, but even that little goes a long, long way.

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Jesus loves us. He is with us, and he is willing to be our partner in every challenge we face. As many times as we fall, He takes us by the hand. He takes us by the hand, and He lifts us up so that we can learn to follow Him anew. Truly the Word is near us. Jesus is very near us. He is our Emmanuel. Daily, we face many fears, many anxieties, but we are never, ever facing them alone.

We are anxious about our economy. We are anxious about the direction of our country and the violence and inhumanity we see all around us. We are anxious about where we will live, how we will pay our bills, how we will take care of those we love. We are anxious about the pace of change and an unknown future.

So much we thought we could rely on doesn't seem to be there anymore. We face illness, loss, and broken relationships. We face painful memories and disappointments. Some of it is life-threatening. The rest just seems that way. We live out our lives in a raging sea of stress hormones, and all too often, we perceive a high degree of threat.

Some people I know can't even stand to watch the news. It seems like a never-ending litany of disaster. Frankly, the news seems designed to keep us stressed out, scared, and tuned in. Then Jesus comes alongside us. He walks out to meet us on the waves, and He says to us, as He said to Simon Peter, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

Now, it's true, many of the things we are afraid of are still there. It's like the old saying from Alcoholics Anonymous, "Serenity is not freedom from the storm. It is peace within the storm." One thing I know: we face our fears better with Jesus at our side. We face our fears better when we pay attention to Him, the living Lord.

He is always calling us out of our self-centered ways and into God's mission of love. He is always calling us into deeper relationship with our neighbors. He is calling us to surrender. He is the only one who is worthy of our surrender so that His love might begin to reign. Truly, the Lord is near us.

He's on our lips. He's in our hearts. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Jesus said, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

Amen.