

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

Our gospel reading today gives us one revelation after another about Jesus' identity – and our own as followers of him as well.

Immediately following the feeding of the 5000, Jesus sent the disciples off in a boat to go to the other side of the sea while he finally went off alone to pray. Remember that this had been his first intent in going into the wilderness, before the crowd followed him and he spent the day teaching, and eventually, feeding them. He sought prayer and solitude to grieve the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas.

The first two things our passage reveals about Jesus are that he understands loss and mourning, and that he turns to prayer to ground and re-center himself before re-engaging in ministry.

As evening fell and the storm appeared on the sea, it was time to get back to work, and Jesus performed his next miracle. As the boat carrying the disciples was being tossed about by the wind and waves, Jesus came to them, walking on the water.

In Hebraic thought, water represented much more than mere physical reality,¹ and it was a means through which God continuously revealed power and salvation. Think of all the stories that show this: the creation of the world (Gen. 1:2), the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17), the mighty act of deliverance at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21), the miraculous entry into the promise land through the swollen River Jordan (Josh. 3:14-17), and so many more.

Who can walk with such authority and freedom? The act and its associations are unmistakable, Jesus is exercising a prerogative that belongs to God alone.² And as if Jesus having the power to walk on the water through the storm, and eventually calming the it, weren't enough to reveal his divine nature, his proclamation, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," reveals even more.

Matthew records Jesus saying *egō eimi*, which can mean simply mean "it is I," but more is being suggested here. For Matthew's audience, this Greek phrase would have been packed with significance. Those are the words the Greek translation of the Old

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, Theological Perspective, Iwan Russell-Jones.

² *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, Theological Perspective, Iwan Russell-Jones.

Testament, the Septuagint, used to translate the Hebrew name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Jesus used that divine name – **I AM** – to announce his presence. And not only is **I AM** here with you, but *do not be afraid*.

This is a phrase that is uttered at important moments throughout scripture, including notably at Jesus birth and resurrection. “Do not be afraid” is a keynote of the gospels, the unveiling of God’s majesty and presence which is never intended to terrorize, but to save and uphold those who witness it.³

The disciples witness this revelation of Jesus’ identity and Peter – ever bold – accepts this knowledge and essentially tells Jesus he believes in him so much that he knows if Jesus commanded it, he too could walk on water. I imagine Jesus smiling when he looked at Peter and said, “Come.”

So Peter got out of the boat and started walking on water, until he noticed the strong wind. Then he became frightened and started to sink. In that moment of panic another piece of Jesus’ identity is revealed, for Peter exclaimed, “Lord, save me!”

Jesus is indeed Lord, the one who has power over the deep, over the wind and waves, and all the destructive forces that threaten to overwhelm human life.⁴

³ *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Theological Perspective, Iwan Russell-Jones.*

⁴ *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Theological Perspective, Iwan Russell-Jones.*

And then for the third time in this passage we read the word **immediately**, this time to indicate that Jesus **immediately** reached out his hand to save Peter. He took him to the boat, and once there he calmed the storm and the final bit of his identity was proclaimed: all gathered in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the son of God.”

This story, and the nature miracle it tells, takes us deep into the ongoing revelation of who Jesus really is – but it also shows us something equally important about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

This week at Bible study our conversation opened up this scripture for us in a new way. It centered on the comment Jesus made when he caught Peter as he was sinking, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

One person wondered about what the word doubt meant there. Was it about disbelief, or distraction? Was his doubt in Jesus, or Peter doubting himself? Because Peter was doing fine walking on water as long as his eye was on Jesus, it was only when he was distracted by the wind that he started to sink.

We looked up the Greek word for doubt used in this passage, *diaporeō*, and turns out it means “to stand divided.” If that’s not a definition of being distracted, then I don’t know what is!

And it reveals so much not only about Peter, but about all of us who would choose to follow Jesus through the storms of life.

Our call is to keep our eye on Jesus, our ever-faithful companion on the way. When we do this, we can walk on water and move through the chaos that surrounds us.

But the world, and our own heads and hearts, are full of distractions. We are pulled in many directions. When we turn our attention too far away from God we do well to remember this story and its promise: when we start sinking we have only to call out and God will **immediately** reach out and catch us, and bring us to safety.

God knows that throughout our lives we will follow and then be distracted, then follow again only to be distracted again, a cycle we see play out with the disciples in all of the gospels. But those same gospels stand as a record of the saving love and grace of God always being extended to us, lifelines to pull us from the storms that ravage our souls and bring us safely to shore.

This is the central revelation of our gospel today: God, revealed in Jesus, loves us not in spite of – but perhaps because of – our humanness, a humanness God chose to experience in the person of Jesus.

Coming to know Jesus changes our lives because when we ground our lives in prayer like Jesus taught, and we call on God in good times and bad, we can boldly proclaim our belief and follow in Christ's footsteps, wherever they lead. Amen.