

Bible Study Guide: Week of 8-3-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 14:22-33

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."

22 Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

We typically expect words like “immediately” from the Gospel of Mark rather than Matthew, but here Matthew emphasizes several times in this passage that things are happening suddenly. This is a jarring passage that makes us feel the rush and discomfort of having the wind and the waves against us. Here also the disciples are sent out without Jesus. The term “made” isn’t quite strong enough. Jesus compels them or forces them to go ahead without him. Jesus, remember, has been described by Matthew as Emmanuel—God with Us. The disciples are left alone and, as we may expect, it does not go especially well for them in their venture without Jesus.

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.

From early in the history of the church, the metaphor of a ship has been used to symbolize the church. Here, the trouble the disciples have on the water looks ahead to the struggles of the early church in the days following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The term used for “battered” here literally means tortured. It would be the same word used to describe early Christians who were put on trial and examined by torture. Just as we might wonder about Christian martyrs, the question here is, “How long can the ship hold up under such duress?” Likewise, the murky deep surrounding the disciples reminds them of how far from solid ground they are in the absence of Jesus. And, of course, to make matters worse, they are facing an adverse wind. Again, things are not going well for 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.

The Greek term for “early in the morning” here is literally “during the fourth watch”—the time from 3:00 AM to 6:00 AM. Although we often think of the physical impossibility of one walking on the water—preoccupied with ideas about gravity and surface tension, in the ancient mind this feat was not a physical impossibility but a spiritual impossibility. Only God could conquer the power and chaos of the sea, especially during a storm. Even in the modern world we ought to be aware of the sheer power of water. I remember standing at the ruins of the bridge between Ocean Springs and Biloxi, MS shortly after Hurricane Katrina and marveling that “mere” water picked up giant slabs of concrete and threw them like rag dolls into the ocean. Or think about our own experience of the sheer power of water during the 2015 flooding. In the ancient mind, only God was great enough to overcome such fury and chaos. That fact makes the disciples’ assessment that “it is a ghost” make more sense. The two possibilities, in their mind, is that the entity walking toward them was either God or a ghost. They believe the latter is the more likely option.

27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Jesus’ literal words are, “Take courage! I am! Do not be afraid.” The words “I am” of course should call to mind the name God gave to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. By invoking these words, Jesus is not just telling them, “It is I” as we have in the English translation, but more than that Jesus is identifying himself with the holy name of God. He is refuting their assessment that he is a ghost and instead confirming for them that he is indeed God with them.

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?"

Often this story is interpreted in this way: Peter at first trusted in Jesus, but later failed to trust and nearly drowned. The takeaway for us thus becomes, “if Peter had enough faith, he wouldn’t have begun to sink.” There are other ways we might interpret this story. If we extend the metaphor of the boat representing the church community gathered, Peter’s failure comes not when he begins to sink, but rather when he leaves the boat and his fellow believers. If we press it a bit further, his initial failure seems to be in his request to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you...” followed by his proposal for a test or a proof of Jesus’ claimed identity. Rather than trusting Jesus’ words, he demands further proof. But the truth of this text is that the focus should not be on Peter’s faith or failure at all. The focus is instead on Jesus who is indeed God with the gathered community. When we doubt this truth, Jesus is there to catch us and our community is there to welcome us safely back into the boat.

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."

Further evidence linking “the boat” with “the church” comes here, when those in the boat worship Jesus. Also, by getting into the boat, the wind ceases—the shelter of the gathered community makes the storm not so bad, after all.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Why do you think Jesus compelled the disciples to get into the boat by themselves and go ahead without him?**
- 2. What would you consider to be the wind and the waves that the church community faces today? How are we to find and focus on the presence of Jesus with us even in the midst of such storms?**
- 3. How do you feel about Peter here? Do you admire his boldness? Do you relate to his “little faith?” Do you understand his desire for a sign or proof of God’s presence with him?**