

Proper 14A

Matthew 14:22-33

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Have you ever noticed that you can hear or read a Bible story a gazillion times, but on the gazillion plus one time, you notice something you never did before? That is what happened to me with today's gospel story. In the story we hear today, the focus is typically on either Jesus walking on water as he makes his way to the disciples boat or on Peter's failed attempt to walk on water when he gets out of the boat. As I read this gospel story recently, several questions ran through my mind that I don't remember ever thinking about before.

For instance, why did Jesus make the disciples get in the boat and go to the other side rather than let them hang out on the beach until Jesus was ready to go? Why walk on the water at all rather than taking the land route to the other side? When the disciples hear the voice of Jesus, did everyone relax except Peter who still questions if what he is seeing is really Jesus? Or when they were falling over each other in fear, did they decide to draw straws to see who was going to challenge the apparition on the water and Peter drew the short straw?

And even with all these new questions which opened a theological can of worms, what struck me for the first time were two words, "take heart." Every time I have read this Gospel passage, I know that my eyes saw these words, but they never stuck in my brain like they did this time. "Take heart."

If you take the time to look at all the various pictures and plaques that adorn the walls at St. Michael's, you will see a plaque inscribed with the words, "Courage, courage!" as a tribute to one of our early members, Keith Catto. He was a giver. Offering his time, talent, and wisdom whenever and wherever it was needed. When things would get hectic, when we faced a seemingly impossible task, or when the kitchen table was covered with vegetables that needed sliced, diced, and julienned; the infamous words, "Courage, courage," would come forth from his lips bringing a little bit of joy into arduous tasks. His words raised our spirits, giving us hope. Keith has gone on to join the saints, but his words still ring in my ears. His was the voice of Jesus saying, "Take heart."

'Take heart' is an idiomatic phrase. The phrase is used to bolster confidence and courage, to give encouragement, to buoy someone's spirit, and most importantly, to give hope. The disciples needed all of these as their boat was brought to a standstill by the storm as wave after wave battered the boat. Perhaps that is one reason why Jesus chose the water walking route, even if he gave little thought to how much it would scare those in the boat. Amid life's challenges, we need to know that we aren't alone, that someone is our corner and has our backs.

Take heart. Have courage. When we hear the word courage, we normally think of doing something daring or heroic. For some it might even evoke bad memories of someone flinging the word 'courage' at us in contempt, trying to tear us down because they think we are weak. But none of these things are at the core of Jesus' words, "Take heart." He is telling us that our vulnerability is a strength. Reminds us that we are enough just as we are. Encourages us to speak our truth and to keep going. Helps us find inner peace when we are afraid, when our jaw is clenched tight in frustration, and when the butterflies in our stomach are having a party. His words lift us up and surround us with his love. Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I..." In other words, eyes on me. I got you.

On one crazy, super challenging day when my brain was left feeling like mush, I was walking through Wal-Mart and saw a children's book by Sandra Boynton on the end cap of an aisle. On the cover is chicken shouting out the title, *Woo Hoo! You're Doing Great!* (2023). I bought three copies and pasted a copy of the book jacket on the main entrance door to our veterinary treatment area because as it says, "Surely what you need in your life is an overenthusiastic random chicken cheering you on." Honestly, I think we all do.

While I can't picture Jesus as an over enthusiastic chicken, I can certainly see him sending one our way when we need it the most. When we are struggling with life's challenges, the Holy Trinity is there to help lift us up. When the world around us or even our mind is whispering to us, "You can't", the Holy Trinity is there to remind us of what we can do. To give us the inner strength to take the next step and then the next. They are there cheering us on, "Woo Hoo! You're doing great!", which is just another way to say, "take heart".

Life is challenging, regardless of how old you are. The challenges just change with age and circumstances. Life can also get crazy. Whirlwind days that become a blur of what you did and when you did it. Times when you encounter the weirdest things or question your own sanity. Now and then, life drags you down so much that it can take a herculean effort just to get out of bed in the morning. I will admit that part of my morning prayer is, "Lord, help me get through this day."

In the chaos and storm-tossed seas of life, it is easy to lose sight of Jesus. Every day our attention is pulled in multiple directions- school, work, sports, family, bills to pay- so much so that it is easy for Jesus to fall off our radar. When that happens, we might wonder if Jesus is there when we cry out, "Help me!"

What we need to believe in the core of our being is that Jesus is there with us every step of the way. We are his and he is ours. We are not alone when faced with the many challenges that life throws our way. The difficulty comes in learning that what we want Jesus to do and what he does will probably look nothing alike. Jesus comes to us in the most unexpected ways and in the most unexpected places, meeting us wherever we are in the moment. Even if we don't immediately recognize that we are looking into the eyes of Jesus, take heart, he is there.

There is an old joke about a man stranded on his rooftop in a flood. He cries out to God, "Save me!" Soon a man in a rowboat comes by to rescue him, but the man on the roof waves him away as he waits for God to save him. Then a motorboat comes by, and the man does the same thing.

Finally, a helicopter drops a ladder, to save the man from ever rising flood waters, but the man tells them to go away because he is waiting for God to save him. His house becomes submerged under the flood, and the man drowns. When he gets to heaven he asks God, “Why didn’t you save me?” God replies, “I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?”

We often fail to see God, even when he is right in front of us. We are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. When someone says to you, “Woo Hoo! You are doing great!”, you are looking into the eyes of Jesus. When you hear someone say with gusto, “Courage, courage!”, you are hearing the voice of Jesus. Take heart, Jesus is here.

Amen.

Works Cited

Boynton, Sandra. *Woo Hoo! You're Doing Great!* New York: Hatchette Book Group, 2023.