

For the disciples, it has been one heck of a long day. They have been in high gear all day long. They first learn that John the Baptist has been executed. So Jesus tries to get away from the crowds to deal with his grief. And he takes his disciples with him. They try to make a break for it taking a boat across the Lake of Galilee. But the crowds pursue them and catch up to them when they reach shore.

It kind of reminds me of the beginning of the movie "A Hard Day's Night." In that movie, the Beatles keep trying to get away from their screaming fans, but the fans relentlessly pursue them. The crowds treat Jesus the same way, and the disciples are along for the ride.

So when the crowds catch up to Jesus, he feels compelled to stop and teach and heal. And after a very long day, as evening comes, he tells the disciples to feed 10 or 15,000 people with only 5 loaves and 2 fish. It's a seemingly impossible task. But amazingly, there's enough for everyone, with 12 extra baskets of food to spare.

But now darkness is falling, and Jesus sends the crowds home. He also sends the disciples home. Basically, the disciples get to pull an all-nighter after a long day. They get to row the boat back across the lake under cover of darkness.

But conditions are not good. The disciples are struggling against the wind and the waves out in the middle of the lake, and they're not making much progress. They've been up for at least 21 hours. They've been out rowing for at least 9 hours straight. And they're exhausted. They're probably at the end of their rope.

But it is at precisely this moment, when the night is blackest, when the situation seems bleakest... at this moment, Jesus comes to the disciples. Sometime during the 4th watch, Matthew says, between 3 and 6 a.m., Jesus comes to his disciples. They can't make it to shore. So he comes to them, walking on the water.

Now when we hear this with our jaded modern ears, we try to look for explanations. Some have suggested that there is a mistranslation, that Matthew, Mark, and John meant "beside the sea" instead of "on the sea."

But for Matthew and his original audience there was only one thing that would come to mind when they heard about Jesus walking on water. The meaning would have been crystal clear in bright flashing neon. They knew from their scriptures about walking on water, in the book of Job, and Isaiah, and Psalms, and Habakkuk, and Ecclesiasticus. In the Old Testament, there is only one being who is able to walk on water.

Only God walks on water. God is the one who "stretches out the heavens and tramples the waves of the Sea."<sup>1</sup> If Jesus is walking on water, then Jesus is doing something that only God can do.

Therefore, Matthew's message is that Jesus comes to the disciples as a human being who is doing something that only God does. That's an astounding thing, and the disciples are

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<sup>1</sup> Job 9:8

blown away by it. As a matter of fact, they're terrified. They think that Jesus must be a ghost, for no regular human being walks on water. But Jesus reassures them. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Jesus offers words of calming comfort to his exhausted and frightened disciples: 'Don't worry, it's me, I'm here. I'm present, things will be okay.'

But his message also carries a deeper meaning. It literally reads, "Be bold, or be brave; I AM; do not be afraid."

Jesus is speaking to his disciples with the same words God used when he spoke to Moses from the burning bush: "I AM." I AM WHO I AM, or I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.

Jesus is encouraging his disciples, but he's also giving them a message. The message is that he shares a oneness with God. The message is that he and God can be identified in the same way: I AM.

The waves are high, the winds are strong, the water is rough, life is risky. But be brave, Jesus says, I AM. God has power over nature, and so do I. God can calm storms of life, and so can I. I AM; do not be afraid.

Like the sea, life can be rough.

There are times when the surface you're standing on gets shaken, and it's walk. There are times in life when the rug is pulled out from under you and you can't keep your balance. There are times when the adrenaline surges through your body. Your heart races. Your stomach churns and feels like it's tied in knots. You may think that the only thing you can possibly do is just bend over and vomit. The storms in life at times can be horribly frightening and stressful and unsettling and downright crazy. We all know that 2020 has been a crazy and difficult and disorienting year. And it's not over yet.

But... But in the midst of hardship, in the midst of struggle, in the midst of the storms of life, there comes a voice. "I AM; do not be afraid."

Of course, it's much easier to say "Don't be afraid" than it is to really have no fear. After all, Peter steps out of the boat in faith and begins walking on the water with Jesus. But then suddenly he begins to realize what he's doing and where he is. He gets distracted, and he begins to sink.

It reminds me of the Coyote in those old Road Runner cartoons. The Coyote would run off the side of a cliff and be standing in mid-air. But then he would look down and realize where he was. And it was at this point that the Coyote would begin to fall. The same thing happens to Peter.

Peter impetuously steps out on the water and is able to walk with Jesus. Then he thinks about what he's doing, and he begins to sink. And yet, as Peter sinks, he calls out to Jesus, "Lord save me." And Jesus does. Peter is in distress. Peter asks for help. And he receives it. Jesus reaches out and saves him.

In the midst of the storms of life, the message is clear. Don't worry about the wind. Don't worry about the waves. 'I AM,' Jesus says, 'don't be afraid.' But even if the wind seems too high, even if the seas seem too rough, even if you let your fears get the better of you, don't give up. Instead call upon the name of the Lord, and he will deliver you. GOD IS. JESUS IS. Do not be afraid.

God is here. God will hear. And God will save.