

# “Walking Through Fear”

Matthew 14:22-33 & Psalm 91

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**Prayer for Understanding** Ever present Lord, we thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Holy Spirit open our eyes to the signs of your presence, open our ears to your voice and open our minds to your wisdom. Amen.

What would you do if you had no fear?

Pastor Joanna Adams wrote, “God is present in the fiercest storms and in the darkest nights. God will not let you sink, not now, not ever. If you get to the place where you can believe a thing like that, it will be the miracle of your life. I am convinced that miracles like that happen every day.”

Look to the horizon. Imagine your future. Imagine our country’s future, our world’s future. Fear can paralyze. Fear can diminish goodness. Jesus shows us how to walk through fear. Jesus assures us that God walks with us always and saves us every time our fear overwhelms us.

The disciples had a fear-filled week with exhausting work, little sleep, and overwhelming stress. Their good friend, John the Baptist, was murdered by King Herod. The disciples are fearing for their lives. Jesus and the disciples withdrew to a remote, deserted wilderness. Around fifteen thousand people found them. Jesus healed all who were sick. The disciples were providing the logistics, crowd control, and follow up. They were concerned about food. Jesus fed the crowd with five loaves and two fish.

Jesus needed sabbath. Before Jesus departed for sabbath rest, he insisted the disciples take care of themselves. Jesus is confident that rowing, fishing, and resting on the opposite shore will be just the thing to replenish their spirits.

Matthew proclaims, **Matthew 14:22-33 NRSV Immediately Jesus insisted the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while Jesus dismissed the crowds. And after Jesus had dismissed the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, Jesus was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. Immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when Peter noticed the strong wind, Peter became frightened, and beginning to sink, Peter cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."**

The wind was against them. Most, if not all of us, know from personal experience the stress of having the wind against us. Literally in a canoe, or on a bike. Metaphorically the struggle to make progress; to pay off debt; to be physical fit; to obtain your preferred weight; to get your degree; to achieve your dream. Against the wind, we each have days, weeks, even years like that. You take one step forward and four steps backward. It takes an enormous amount of energy just to stay where you are at, to not lose ground, to hold on. As a country we are against the wind to end racism and establish equality for all, to stop abusing our planet and live sustainable, to overcome coronavirus, to employ everyone desiring employment, to unite in harmony.

The disciples were rowing against the wind at 3 a.m., the darkest time of night. Unless you work the night shift, or are rowing across a lake, 3 a.m. is the worst time to be awake. Even the most reasonable among us have been known to think unreasonable thoughts and come to unreasonable conclusions when we are alone with our thoughts, fears, and dubious assumptions. Silly things than ghosts can seem real in the dark of the night. The

disciples were exhausted, stressed out, overwhelmed, in a frightening place, far from land, surrounded by black water, which the wind was licking up in surging waves against their face.

Some of life is lived against the wind with fears surging within. It is precisely at this point that the disciples see Jesus walking with them on the water. The disciples are terrified. They thought Jesus was a ghost. In fearful situations often it is less mind boggling to believe in ghosts than to believe in the loving, sustaining presence of God. Fear clouds our vision urging us to doubt that God is always with us. Fear distorts our perception of God forgiving, healing, mending, saving us. Fear blurs our sight of seeing resurrection life burst forth from death. Fear causes us to doubt that ultimately love will prevail. Fear boxes us into being small and living hesitant. Fear shrinks our belief in God doing the magnificent.

It is at this point that the story asks its most piercing question of us, and what it wants to know is this: Do we believe that at the darkest, most exhausting, against the wind, fear laden places in our lives, God is with us, that God is providing what we need to get us through?

Jesus said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Be not afraid. It is easier said than done.

There is a story about two little boys whose mother asked them to chase a chicken snake out of the henhouse. They looked everywhere for that snake but could not find it. The more they looked, the more afraid they got. Finally, they stood up on their tiptoes to look on the top nesting shelf and came nose to nose with the snake. They fell all over themselves and one another running out of the chicken house. "Don't you know a chicken snake won't hurt you?" their mother asked. "Yes, one of the boys answered, "but there are some things that will scare you so bad you will hurt yourself."

How much does fear, worry, and anxiety diminish your future compared to actual circumstances? Think about our country today. The more fearful we become the more likely we are to hurt each other, disrespect others, to be frustrated with one another.

Our biblical story is urging us to not let fear overwhelm us. It is asking what would you do if you had no fear? Perhaps something outlandish like walking on water. Peter walked on water until he became fearful as he examined the wind against him. When Peter lost sight of God with him, he began to sink. Jesus reached out and saved Peter.

There are few things one can do in life if their focus is only on all that might go wrong. It is wise to be aware of risks, to be prepared, to take precautions and then one needs to visualize everything going well, achieving the goal, visualizing successfully completing each aspect of the quest.

Too often, one gives way more power to fears and the wind against us than is reality. God is inviting us to be propelled through fear by imagining the blessings of God.

In our biblical story it was not gravity, not the wind, not the waves that sank Peter. Fear sank Peter. It was Peter's inability to see God walking with him through the storm. William James wrote, "Faith is the force in life and when faith is absent, life collapses."

When Jesus got into the boat the wind ceased. The disciples worshiped Jesus, saying, "truly you are the Son of God." Jesus, God in human flesh. Emmanuel, God with us always. God here in our life. Helping us in the depth of our need. Helping us slice through the wind. Enabling us to walk through fear. There will be plenty of storms, some storms may last for generations, some storms may not cease in our lifetime. God will get us through every storm.

We will find ourselves in fearful, against the wind moments. We get to choose our attitude. We get to choose courage, to walk through fear, to care for ourselves, to care for others, to make a difference. Love is risky. Love is transforming the world. Love creates wonder, majesty, and grandeur. Be brave, choose love. Love casts out fear.

Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable; and most of all fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God."

Be not afraid. God is with you.

Psalm 91 was prayed in an era when life was precarious. Life expectancy was 25 years. Malnutrition and disease were ever present threats. Slavery, oppression, and war was rampant. One could lose their life at any moment. In the midst of fear, terrifying instability, and uncertainty Psalm 91 was written to speak of God's absolute protection.

Psalm 91 has one foot in the present and one in the future. The present is bleak. The psalm lists terrors that were likely to happen to those who prayed this psalm, disease, disasters, war, a plague, attack by wild animals and death. The other foot is in the future Kingdom of God, heaven, proclaiming even though one may be against the wind by all these terrors and death, ultimately love prevails, resurrection happens, all will be glorious. The writer of Psalm 91 is so confident of God saving us from every predicament that they declare salvation throughout the psalm in the present tense, as if it has already happened, even though one is suffering in the midst of the terror. One is encouraged to fear not in the midst of the storm for salvation is coming. The psalm ends with “long life with satisfy them”. Often in the Old Testament long life indicates a life long with love and has nothing to do with the amount of years someone lived.

The psalm is addressed to a person “who lives in the shelter of the Most High”, a person who already trusts in YHWH and is in the midst of deadly threats. The psalm is a prayer that strives to help a person walk through fear. The implied addressee is a terrified worshiper who is seeking help. The psalm assures them that God is with us always. The psalm reframes situations with assurance that God will deliver us to a glorious eternal future.

**Psalm 91 “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.” For God will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease. God will cover you with God’s feathers. God will shelter you with God’s wings. God’s faithful promises are your armor and protection. Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night, nor the arrow that flies in the day. Do not dread the disease that stalks in darkness, nor the disaster that strikes at midday. Though a thousand fall at your side, though ten thousand are dying around you, these evils will not touch you. Just open your eyes and see how the wicked are punished. If you make the Lord your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your home. For God will order God’s angels to protect you wherever you go. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. You will trample upon lions and cobras; you will crush fierce lions and serpents under your feet! The Lord says, “I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name. When they call on me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them and show them my salvation.”**

Psalm 91 has helped a multitude of people walk through fear. It has also helped, sustained, and encouraged those who are oppressed. Those who oppress, discriminate, seek power over others, seek to control others, are the wicked, their hateful actions will come to an end and be overcome by love and equality.

Max Horkheimer struggled with the powers of oppression. Psalm 91 helped him see that a world of perfect equality is becoming a reality. On his deathbed, Max wrote a meditation on the power of Psalm 91. He remembered that it was his mother’s favorite psalm, she prayed it continually as she struggled to survive under Nazi occupation. Max wrote, “It was the expression of her certainty of a divine homeland in the face of the misery and the horror in reality. Such confidence prevailed throughout her life in spite of a full consciousness of the disaster on the European horizon.” Max realized that the psalm sustained his mother as she walked past the dead. The psalm acknowledged real dangers and lists troubles that she endured. The psalm promises deliverance. The psalm gave her a vision of a world where justice reigns. The psalm gave her courage to walk through a world with dangers all around. Max urges his audience to trust in God as a means of opposing injustice. God provides shelter, refuge, to enable one to overcome their fear so they can envision a loving, joyful world of equality and serve to make that world a reality today.

Psalm 91 is often prayed at night to provide comfort to the fearful enabling them to sleep. The words, “God is my refuge, my strength, my rescuer” are often worn as an amulet to disperse fear.

We are encouraged to speak the words, “God is my refuge, my strength, my rescuer” over and over to help us walk through fear. God works through the spoken word to make it reality. In the beginning, God spoke words to create a good creation. Jesus’ spoke words to forgive, heal, mend, and resurrect. Speaking “God is my refuge, my strength, my rescuer” is partnering with God to bring order to the chaos of today. Speaking “God is my refuge, my strength, my rescuer” helps us walk through fear. Free of fear what will you do? Amen

