

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: August 13, 2023, Year A, 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Title: How Do You Picture Peter?

Focus: This passage is well-known to many and we may have pre-existing impressions as we read and hear the story today. How do you picture Peter? Is he an example of what *not* to do, in that he was afraid and doubtful, or is his story an encouraging, hopeful one to you that reflects real life and real faith? Let's discover the good news in this passage.

### **Matthew 14:22-33**

<sup>22</sup>Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup>And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup>but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup>And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup>But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup>But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." <sup>28</sup>Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." <sup>29</sup>He said, "Come." So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

### **Pictures of Peter**

Do you remember when Jesus first called Peter and some of the other disciples? As described in Matthew. . .

<sup>18</sup>As [Jesus] walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." <sup>20</sup>Immediately they left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:18-20).

Or the time when Jesus and the disciples were walking along and Jesus asked them for some feedback:

<sup>13</sup>. . . "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

[They replied.]

<sup>15</sup>He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup>And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! <sup>18</sup>And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church . . . (Matthew 16:13-18a).

What's the picture you have of Peter? Perhaps bold, even impulsive. He was quick to speak up and quick to act. And what's the picture that you have of Peter from today's story in Matthew 14?

I imagine you have heard this story before. Jesus is walking on the water and Peter gets out of the boat to join him. Our story picks up where last week's story closed. Last week we talked about Jesus hearing about the death of John the Baptist. He was deeply impacted by his grief and he went away in a boat to be by himself. But crowds followed him, and when he returned to shore, he saw them. He had compassion and cured their sick. When the day grew long, the disciples wanted Jesus to send the crowds away into the neighboring towns. Rather than send them away, Jesus drew the disciples into the story and used them to feed the crowd of 5000 men and more women and children.

Today's story continues on the same day.

- Jesus sends the disciples off in a boat to go to the other side (of the Sea of Galilee). The verb there is *compels*, or he *made* them, as it says in the NRSV.
- He dismissed the crowds.
- Then Jesus went up on the mountain by himself to pray and evening came.
- The boat with the disciples was battered by waves and was far from shore and the wind was against them.

When morning came, Jesus walking toward them on the sea.

- The disciples were afraid—terrified--thinking it was a ghost and they cried out in fear.
- Jesus calls out to them: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."
- Peter called out to Jesus lord if it is, you command me to come to you on the water (v. 28).
- <sup>29</sup>He said, "Come."
- So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.
- <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and he began to sink . . .

## How Do You Picture Peter from *this* Story?

How do you picture Peter from *this* story?

I imagine you have heard this story before. Have you heard a sermon about it or been in a Bible study class studying this text? What do you think about Peter?

- Is he an example of what not to do?
- Or is he an example to follow?

I think there is definitely more than one way to view Peter and not just different views, but also potentially *opposing* views: Peter could be an example to follow or you could see Peter as an example of what *not* to do. So, how do you picture Peter?

### **“Doubting” Thomas as an Example of how there can be different pictures**

As I read this story about Peter, one parallel or a comparison to another story and important person is the story about Thomas and the other disciples on the day of Jesus’ resurrection. Recall in that story that the disciples are gathered together all in one place and the doors are locked because of their fear. The disciples are gathered, but Thomas is not among them. Jesus suddenly appears to them, and they recognize him.

When the others tell Thomas, “We have seen the Lord,” what does he say?

- But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25).

And it’s from this expression of Thomas that we unfortunately label him *doubting* Thomas. I don’t see him as doubting Thomas. I think that’s an unfortunate label we give him. What he says he needs or asks for is no more than what the other disciples have already seen from their direct interaction with Jesus.

And the next week they are once again together in one place, and Jesus again appears before them. He approaches Thomas, and even before actually touching the wounds of Jesus, Thomas cries out. “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

And this is faithful Thomas, and yet the picture of Thomas remains of calling him, “Doubting Thomas,” as though that is the thing to avoid, or the thing not to do. So, in the same way that we may have a lingering negative picture of Thomas, I wonder what our dominant picture of Peter is.

### **How do you picture Peter?**

- Is he an example of what *not* to do?
- Or is he an example to follow?

The “**Don’t be like Peter**” picture is something like this:

- He got out of the boat, he saw the waves, and he felt the power of the wind and he became afraid, and he took his eyes off Jesus and he began to sink.
- Peter was afraid. Fear is the opposite of faith.
- He took his eyes off Jesus.
- Don’t be like Peter.

- And if we have this picture of Peter, then that means we have a particular picture of Jesus that goes with it.
  - When we hear Jesus say, “You of little faith, why did you doubt,” then we would likely hear Jesus say that in a scolding sort of tone.

How do we picture Peter?

## **Peter and the Church**

How we picture Peter is even more important when we consider his pivotal role in leadership. Remember how Jesus names and commissions Peter:

- <sup>18</sup>. . . I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (Mt. 16:18a).

How we picture Peter is also important in part because in some ways with his designation by Jesus and his leadership role he embodies the church. We see ourselves through him.

*Describe why I think Peter is a hopeful example for us.*

## **Peter is a Recipient of Grace—Jesus is Present and Responds**

Everybody is different, and may express faith in their own way, and I understand that people may picture Peter differently, but, I think that this is a hopeful and grace-filled good news story about Peter.

He is bold enough to get out of the boat, and I think that’s an example to follow. He has got to be aware of the wind and the waves, even before he gets out of the boat and yet he still gets out of the boat. The text describes that he took his eyes off Jesus and he noticed the strong wind and the waves. He was frightened.

But like Thomas who first doubted and yet also proclaimed faith as he cried out, “My Lord and my God,” I don’t see acknowledging fear an expression of faithlessness. I think experiencing fear doesn’t mean you don’t have trust; I think that having trust or growing in faith means that you trust God to be present with you in times of fear so that you may persevere in faith.

Yesterday here in the sanctuary we gave thanks to God for the life of Dorothy Nichols. One of the scriptures we read was from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. David, to whom the psalm is attributed, had been a shepherd boy. In the psalm he compares God’s care for humankind to that of a shepherd for the sheep. So, when he says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil,” it’s because he knows that even in whatever fear he experiences, he knows that God is with him: “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” David has the shepherd’s crook with him to guide and direct sheep and pull them back from harm. He has the club to protect them from

predators. He trusts God will be with him. God has given us tools to ward off danger, but the danger is still present. I hear the same assurance of God's presence in the midst of fear in today's text as well.

- And what about the power of the wind and the waves in this story as the source of fear?

The boat is "battered by the waves, far from the land, [and] the wind was against them" (v. 24), and that was earlier in the evening—it could even be worse now in the morning as they are weary. Remember that these are fisherman accustomed to being on the water. The fear is justified. It's a storm with enough power to sink the boat and surely drown a single person. Peter has good reason to be afraid.

And that, too, is reassuring good news for us as we see fear is acknowledged and yet is not the end of the story. We could identify plenty of things in our individual or congregational or community lives that legitimately prompt fear. The wind and the waves can represent our fears, too.

- Uncertain health
- Coping with other kinds of change
- Bearing loneliness or grief after loss—that's something we saw in Jesus, as we talked about today with his grief upon John's death.
- The direction of our country and how we see political rivals jockey for position and use intentional misinformation (lying). We see that people will say anything or *do* anything to get what they want.
- The harm our human choices and behaviors have on the environment—that's something to be afraid about.

In response to Peter's fears, Jesus doesn't scold him—at least that's not how I hear him. I hear it more as lament or commiseration—as an acknowledgement of the reality of fear.

He doesn't just offer advice as a mantra like, "Keep your eyes on me." The good news in this story doesn't come so much from the example of Peter but comes from Jesus. We've been talking all along about "How do we picture Peter?" and seeing Peter as a focal point within the passage with whom we identify. But ultimately this is a good news story, a hopeful story, not because of Peter, but because of Jesus.

The good news from this passage is that when Peter is afraid and he cries out, "Lord, save me," (v. 30), Jesus is there. He reaches out his hand, "immediately," and holds Peter up (v. 31).

However bold or afraid Peter may be, however skilled or flawed he may be as a person or as a leader, when he calls out to Jesus, saying, “Save me!,” Jesus is there. He saves him from drowning and he restores him to his vocation, his call, as a disciple.

And that’s the good news for us, too: In this story, we have assurance that

- Jesus is present, will respond, will reach out his hand.
- Jesus will grab a hold of us when we are afraid and will restore us to where we can find our place of service.

## **This is Good News**

So ultimately, I believe this is a good news story with Peter, providing an example for us how to take on real-life challenges as we face legitimate fears.

We may recognize that Peter is courageous and bold enough to take action, but also that he falters. The good news is that when he called out to Jesus, Jesus was there and responded to save him, which is a sign of the presence and readiness of God. The promise of this text or the good news is that God will never give up, God is with us and for us. With that assurance, may we be encouraged to persevere, in spite of fear.

Thanks be to God for the Good News of God’s presence even in the midst of fear.