

Good Advice or Good News? Matt.14:22-33 Aug. 13. 2017

As I sat at Sim's BBQ on Friday night with our church members and talked with Janet and Leah Brooks about Leah going off to school, asking those pesky questions, had her other friends left yet, was she excited - I had to resist the urge to give her advice. I'm sure most of our graduated seniors have had their share of advice. We can go all Hollywood, acting out those scenes where the small town boy or girl is headed for the big city and everyone in town is doling out advice as the young person heads toward a bigger future - don't talk to strangers; eat your vegetables; get plenty of sleep; look people in the eye; make sure your hand shake is firm; lock your door at night!

I read an article on the plane last week that was titled, **What Nobody Is Going to Tell You About Your Freshman Year.**¹ Thinking back to my freshman year of college, much of what I read rang true. One of the things no one tells you about that first year is, for instance, "***I wish someone told me*** that my study habits in high school absolutely will not hold up in college. When you were told to "read the text" in high school for homework, you wrote "no homework" in your planner for that day. Reading your text book in high school was actually laughed at in most situations and if you didn't have an end of the year freak out about where your text books were, you were doing it wrong. [In college] Read your textbooks; every page, every chapter. Write everything down, from notes to homework, it's all important."²

We give out advice often in moments where we can say we have "braved the waters" and can offer someone advice on how to do the same. Think about the advice you were given when you had a baby. Or when you got married. Or when you were raising your toddler. Or your teenager. Or when you got sick. Someone was always there to give you bit of guidance about how to weather the storm you currently are finding yourself in. Advice is usually well intentioned. It's like an innate yearning to shield someone else from moments of despair, disappointment or heartache. To tell them, *here are the pitfalls and how to avoid them... you'll get through this just like I did.*

¹ Cailin Austin <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/what-nobody-is-going-to-tell-you-about-freshman-year>

² ibid

The other gospel writers have their versions about Jesus walking on water and calming the storm, but only Matthew records Peter's *stepping out of the boat*. And because Peter does something bold and brave, we love it. Because Peter, who we know to be oh so imperfect, Peter becomes the model of whom we'd like to imitate - *I want to be brave enough to step out of the boat too Lord* - we find ourselves immersed in Matthew's version of the story more than the other gospels.

So when I read this story about the storm, about Jesus walking on water, about Peter stepping out of the boat I'm quick to want to turn this into a similar article, **What Nobody is Going to Tell You About How to Handle Storms In Your Life**. My article would then give us some pointers for storms and the faith to handle them; "I wish someone had told me, as I struggled with depression my sophomore year in college that all I had to do was keep my eyes on Jesus." That's in the story after all. If only Peter had kept his focus on Christ. "If I had done that years ago, I wouldn't have been sinking in the waters of fear and anxiety." Or maybe the article would read, "I wish I would have had the courage to step out of the boat because that is what real faith looks like." If only my faith had been stronger I would have gone out on a limb; I too would have stepped out of the boat. We've all heard these things before or have said them to ourselves.

When we read the story this way it often makes us search it for platitudes, search it for advice or step by step guidance. I want to be a more faithful person, who must I imitate in this story? The disciples in the boat who worship and confess that Jesus is Lord? Peter with all his boldness and his drowning doubts? But honestly reading it that way is for the *what of faith*, and it falls short. What do I need to believe so that I won't have to sink? Wouldn't we all love it if the answer was *just keep your eyes on Jesus?*

But let's be real. If I had been told to step out of the boat in the middle of a storm and the wind blew past me, I'd glance away too - I'm distracted by the soft chime of a text message or email; I can't imagine my inability to focus as I'm told to come out and walk on the water in the middle of a storm.

Even more prominent than the characters in the story, is the presence of something we all face. Even more than the battle of the what is faith, and how can I have enough not to fail - is the presence of fear.

Fear is prominent reality in this story. Between the fear the disciples have at seeing Jesus walking toward them on the water, to the fear of Peter's realization that the storm around him is still surging. Fear is easy to identify with. Fear is a reality in our story too.

Many of us are fearful of our how nation and government leaders will handle diplomacy and the threat of nuclear war. Many people are fearful of the growing climate crisis - oceans are rising and glaciers are melting. In Charlottesville, VA this weekend, as white supremacists march and rally, as one tweet put it, "without their hoods" it is fear that is behind the violence and hatred they stand for. Some of us are fearful of our finances; will we have enough to pay all the bills this month? We fear leaving a bad relationship because of the uncertainty of being on our own. What if the cancer, the illness, the urge to drink comes back? We may fear we are not faithful enough; that we aren't doing enough of the right things.

Fear is so real. To ignore fear and its hold on us is to deny the truth of our existence. And because fear is so real and so prevalent, we read this story wanting to have some guidance so that fear won't dominate our lives. This is when and why we easily turn this passage into a story where we look for good advice. It is too easy read this story and come away with sound bites mistaken for gospel truth - be bold like Peter! Trust Jesus! And of course what we've already said, keep your focus on Christ. All really good advice.

If only we can get our faith right! Then we won't be frightened, then we won't sink. Jesus wasn't really in the business of giving good advice. He wasn't interested in writing an article, *Things I Can Tell You About Storms In Your Life*. Which means maybe this story isn't about good advice. Maybe we've all lived enough to know that there are holes in trying to read ourselves into better faith practices like knowing where to focus and having enough faith to follow God's call into stormy waters.

Which means maybe this story is less about good advice and more about good news.³

A good news reading of the text offers us a promise that does bring calm to our sometimes stormy and fearful lives. Reading the story as good news and not just good advice allows us to concentrate not on *the what of faith* but *the how of faith*. Because in a world of fear, none of us have come to this place to hear good advice, we have come to hear good news.

The good news that Jesus is right there. The reality is that yes of course there are storms. The disciples aren't scared after all, of the storm. They were fishermen-this wasn't the first storm they'd ever been caught in out on their boat. But it was the first storm that they'd ever been caught in where Jesus is with them. When fear takes its grip on them it isn't the storm, it's that someone is walking on the water. Their fear is that something unnatural, otherworldly, perhaps divine and bigger than the cosmos is going on.

And the good news, not good advice, but good news is that the first thing Jesus says in the midst of their fear is, *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid*. The storm doesn't stop. Peter will still try his luck and faith at getting out of the boat and walking on water. But the good news is that Jesus is there and there's no need to let fear sink us. Jesus is walking right through the storm to them. The disciples know that storms pop up all the time. What Jesus offers them in good news is how to handle the fear that now accompanies the storm. It isn't the *what* it is the *how*.

Richard Rohr says, faith isn't **what** to believe it is **how** to believe. How will the disciples react in the storm? How will they react to this teacher who walks out to them on the water? Does the good news that Jesus is with us help us deal with **what** causes storms or does the good news help us with **how** we handle storms in our lives?

The disciples come to a confession of faith, that Jesus is the Son of God, because he is right there in the storm. He isn't a god above the storm watching it from heaven. He isn't beside the storm saying, if you'll come

³ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-10-a-something-more/>

to me the storm will cease. Jesus wasn't there to stop the storm in Matthew, Jesus walked right through it saying, "don't be afraid; I am out here in the middle of this with you." I will walk through anything to get to you.

Isaiah 43 tells the good news to us, "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you..." "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Don't let your mind go to the, 'I have faith that Jesus calms all the storms of our life,' that is just giving yourself good advice; gospel is more than that. The good news is Jesus is there in the storms.

We are all well acquainted with fear. We are all well acquainted with doubt. We will look out into the storm and see Christ and not believe that it could be him. We will either step out of the boat or we will long for the courage to do so. **But the good news in this story is that Jesus is right there - not just there, but here.** And with Christ the promise is the same whether you take a step from the boat or whether you stay in the hull. "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."

When Peter does turn and notice the wind, Jesus immediately takes his hand. Don't let your heart say, 'I believe Jesus will immediately rescue me too'- we have lived in this world long enough to know that isn't how it works. The truth is that in order to reach Peter's hand *immediately*, it meant Jesus was right there; right with Peter. Not far off in heaven. Not in his heart. Jesus was right there. Jesus is right here.

Your faith isn't about weathering the what's. What am I to believe? What more do I need to do? That is formula; step by step. And that's not how life works. Faith is how we believe. How do we know Jesus is here?

Because we've been in the storms. We've been in the boat. We've been out on the water. We, too, have been sinking. *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.* That is the good news.

It isn't what have come to believe – but how have we come to believe this? We have lived through it. We have lived through that freshman year. We've lived through raising teenagers or fighting cancer. And maybe we've lost some of those battles, and we've been drenched in the storm and yet here we sit.

Trust the good news, not good advice. The good news is full of God's promise that we will not pass through the waters alone - we will pass through them with the Lord. The same Lord formed the oceans and lets the storms be a part of our lives. Not the what, the how. How do we believe? We weather the storms and we trust that with Christ, we learn more and more how to live through them - because Christ's promise is to weather them with us.

In the name of the Creator, the Christ and the Sustainer. Amen.