

“Take Heart”

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
August 9, 2026 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
(*Note: Virtual worship only due to high heat and humidity.*)
Text: Matthew 14:25-31

Does anyone else feel like you're about at the end of your proverbial rope? I know I do. I mean, this weather. It is just absolutely crazy. I'm here by myself on an August Sunday because of it. Right now it's just too hot and humid to have folks in the sanctuary in anything close to comfortable, dare I say safe, conditions. All summer long; the weather has defied predictability. Too cold. Too dry. Too hot. Too rainy. Too humid. Dangerous storms that come up fast with little warning. Powerful thunder and lightning. It's almost like a hurricane, chopped into segments and spread out over about six weeks. Weird. And let's be honest – a little frightening. Last summer was bad but this one is even worse in terms of odd, unscripted weather. All this is more than a little unnerving.

“Take heart! Fear not!” the Bible tells us literally over a hundred times. And yet, every day it seems there is something else to be afraid of. More bad news about yet another health crisis brought about by poor decisions at the federal level driven more by ideology and money than anything else. And then, of course, there is the ever spiraling war in Iran gobbling up resources and people at an alarming rate. Worries about threatened cuts to Medicare and Medicaid just when folks need them most. A missing Senator, a partially deconstructed White House, a severely damaged reflecting pool, ongoing threats to legal immigrants, especially the Haitians who lost their long standing protected status for reasons no one can understand. This is bad for so many reasons, not the least of which is that Haitians are a major component of our health care system, forming a large component of the work force in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and hospitals. Those systems do not have enough help as it is, and now there will be even fewer. This, dear ones, is just a scratch on the surface of all that has our beloved country going off the rails at the moment. Literally.

Yet, still. Jesus' words echo across the millennia: “Take heart; it is I, do not be afraid.” Seriously? How can we not be afraid, Jesus? How can we not be afraid of what is going to happen; about just how far all this nonsense happening will go because we are burdened with a federal government seemingly out of control? Too often it feels like the inmates are running the asylum and yet, Jesus still tells us to take heart. To not be afraid. At this point, fear seems like a pretty rational response to all this to me, and I suspect a lot of you too. But guess what? Jesus still offers us this very important advice. He is absolutely on point when he tells the disciples – and us two millennia later – that in the midst of such frightening circumstances, we are not to give in to fear. We are

instead to take heart. To bolster our faith, “gird our loins” as it were, and hang in there. We are to trust that in spite of everything trying to convince us otherwise, God is still in the midst of what’s happening right here and right now. I actually think this is why this particular story about Jesus is included in Matthew’s Gospel. It is a story about what happens when faith and fear collide.

Let’s consider the story a little deeper so perhaps what I’m saying will be a little clearer. First, it’s important to know the context of this particular story. It follows directly after Matthew’s account of the feeding of the 5000 which we talked about last week. Our Scripture text begins with verse 25 but those few verses immediately preceding introduce this next miracle story. They tell us that “immediately” after the disciples have cleaned up all the leftovers from the miraculous meal, Jesus “made” the disciples go on ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee where he would join them after taking some time to pray on the top of a nearby hill. If you remember, he attempted to find some quiet time before the crowds found him once again which is how the feeding of the 5000 happened. He wanted time alone to process the death of his cousin John, to process all that had been going on, to reconnect with the God who guided every moment of his life. But, real life kept intruding. We know what that feels like. Unlike us, however, Jesus never lost sight of his own need for quiet, alone time to pray and just rest in God’s presence. So, the disciples set out across the Sea of Galilee, the “lake” as the Scriptures call it, and he trudged up the mountain. So far, so good. But the weather changed and became miserable. (*That sounds familiar, doesn’t it.*) A powerful storm blew up and Matthew tells us the disciples became afraid as the winds and the waves battered the boat. They were already far from land so there was nothing to do but finish their crossing.

Now, I’m going to pause at this point to take note of something that has always bothered me about this story and this is where it becomes visible. The Scriptures are clear that the disciples were afraid and worried about making it across the Sea. Okay. Understandable. If you’ve been on a boat in a bad storm, you know how quickly things become scary on the open water. But here’s my question. Why weren’t the disciples worried about how Jesus was going to get across the lake during the storm? Had their witnessing of so many miracles performed by Jesus jaded them into thinking nothing would happen to him? Or did they assume he would just take the longer land route and be there to greet them when the storm calmed and their crossing was complete? We don’t know, but it sure seems pretty self-centered to me. Did any of them give Jesus a thought at this moment wondering if *he* was okay? They had to have known how tired he was, how much he was grieving his cousin John. But they don’t express any concern for his well-being. That surprises and disappoints me, but perhaps it shouldn’t. Perhaps

I am expecting too much of these fisherman and herdsman who had given up their lives to follow Jesus in his journey through the Palestinian countryside. They just assumed he'd be okay because he was – well, you know – *Jesus!*

This happens more than we are aware of in our own lives all the time. We just get so wrapped up in our own stuff that we forget to think about the well-being of the other people in our lives, often those we are the closest to and rely the most on. It's ironic when you stop to think about it. But, we do it all the time. So, perhaps we do well to see ourselves in this story quite clearly – as the disciples who are only thinking about themselves in a moment when they are anxious and fearful. Their beloved friend is somewhere out in that terrible storm, but they literally lose sight of him as their own fears cloud everything.

This is no doubt at least part of why they were SO shocked when they suddenly saw Jesus walking on the water right toward them. I mean, talk about something totally unexpected! In fact, it was so crazy that some of them decided it must be a ghost. Important to remember here is that at this time in history, belief in ghosts and spirits, good and evil, was commonplace. In fact, it would have been shocking if they saw this incredible sight and didn't think it was a ghost. Jesus realizes what's happening and that they are frightened so this is when he said, "Take heart! It is I, do not be afraid." He was coming to them, to calm them during the storm, to reassure them that all would be well. Nice.

But then Peter happened. I say Peter "happened" because in fraught moments like this, Peter has a tendency to show off. He's like that one kid in class who always has to be the first to raise their hand to answer a question. Or worse, the student who reminds the teacher they hadn't given a homework assignment for the next day. You know the type, right? Well, Peter decides he needs to prove to Jesus that he can do anything Jesus asks of him AND to prove to the disciples at the same time that he really is the best of them. So, he says to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." I also imagine Peter thought Jesus would say to him, "No, no. That's okay. Just stay put and I'll be right there." Only thing is, Jesus was never one to miss an opportunity to teach a lesson. So, he tells Peter to "come." Peter steps out of the boat, and onto the water when he immediately starts to sink as he experienced fully the power of the wind and the waves. Peter cries, "Lord, save me!" which of course Jesus does. But not without a choice word for Peter as he pulls him to safety: "You of little faith, why did you doubt."

This is one of those times when what Jesus says to the disciples sounds harsh to us. Of course Peter was afraid when he started to sink into the water in the middle of a ferocious storm. Why would Jesus think he wouldn't be? And that's the thing. I don't

think Jesus expected him not to be afraid. He was, after all, in a very scary situation. I think what Jesus was telling him is that it was his faith that God was in the middle of the situation which could keep him safe, if he relaxed into this powerful reality. Peter couldn't keep himself safe. But God could. This is what Jesus understood and Peter didn't. Faith in God allows us to do the impossible, to face the unimaginable, to deal with that which most frightens us.

Now, am I saying if we have faith that we'll be able to walk on water? No, most definitely not. Faith is not about sideshow tricks or hollow miracles that aren't really miracles at all. These kinds of things were, and sadly still are, part of the fake miracles which take place in revival style worship services led by shady, self-appointed pastors. Think Jim and Tammy Faye Baker. Or Paula White-Cain. Flash and dash to make people see God as a miracle worker for those who are worthy, which usually means those who have a lot of money to "give." No wonder people have such a poor opinion of churches these days. Too many charlatans only care about making money claiming a unique call from God they don't have.

The ironic thing about that, however, is that we all do have a call from God to make a positive difference in this world God has gifted to us. God has blessed us all with unique skills and talents and it is meant to be the work of lifetime to figure out what they are and how God needs us to be using them in this particular time and place of our lives. This is where the church plays such an important role because the church, at its core, is a community of the faithful who are all trying to do the same thing – accept God's call to transform their lives thereby helping to make the world a better place. This is the work of discipleship and it happens best within the context of a faith filled and faith grounded community. It is the lifelong work of discerning one's gifts and then using them to the glory of God in our midst.

Sounds like a daunting task, right? Yes, but here's the thing, just like Jesus walked on the water to reach the disciples through the storm, he is still right here reaching out to you to guide you on the path God is inviting you to consider, hoping you will follow. Difficult to wrap your head around, I know. But I promise it's worth your time to ponder a bit. And as you do, just remember what Jesus said to the disciples when they saw him walking to them right through the storm: "Take heart! It is I, don't be afraid!" What more is there to know? Amen.