

February 25th, 2024

Matthew 14:22-33 “Rescue Me from Danger”

Because the English language is such a hodge-podge of borrowed terms and phrases from other languages, we have a rich collection of metaphors that we use to describe things. They can be confusing for people who are learning English. We went to seminary with Keaung Chan, a Korean student who carried a notebook in his pocket that he would use to write down new phrases, idioms and metaphors that he learned. When Mary and I lived in Virginia, we traveled quite a distance to go to classes at our seminary. At the end of the day when classes were over, we'd often say, “Well, it's time to hit the road again.” One day Keaung asked, “What does this mean? Why would you hit a road?” We explained to him that hitting the road meant leaving one place abruptly in order to travel to another place. And we thought this was a good explanation until we introduced him to Ray Charles' song, “Hit the Road Jack” which presented a whole new set of questions about unhealthy relationship dynamics between romantic partners. Keung filled his notebook with all sorts of metaphors including some that were specific to certain geographical regions. He liked, “Nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.” It was fun listening to him practice his metaphores. One week he signed up to preach in chapel.

The day before chapel I asked him, “Are you ready for this?” He said, “I believe so, but I’m as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.” He said it with such a straight face that it was hard not to laugh.

Some of our metaphors and idioms have multiple meanings and can be used to describe a variety of situations. One that’s fairly common is the phrase, “I have a sinking feeling.” We use this to describe a situation where we feel overwhelmed or panicked. It can be used to describe a variety of physical, emotional, relational, professional, and personal situations where you feel like you’re in danger and in need of rescue. Case in point - On April 2, 2019 Gary Cantwell adjourned the monthly Board Meeting a little earlier than we normally would because it started raining and hailing *hard*. To give you a comparison, this past week it rained almost as hard on Monday. So hard, in fact, I canceled Faith and Films partly because I spent a good deal of time in our back yard scrambling to make dams around the chicken coop to keep it from flooding. The worst of that downpour only lasted about an hour though. The one in 2019 lasted three hours and when all was said and done dropped almost five inches of hail and rain in that short period of time. Graham was working at Rite Aid at the time. He called me and said, “I don’t know whether I’m going to be able to drive home. Our dumpster on the loading dock is floating away.” On my way to pick up Graham at Rite

Aid, my friend Kristina called me to say that the roof of her daughter's three-story apartment building over near Chico High School was starting to cave in and she and her boyfriend were trying desperately to get their belongings out of their first-floor apartment where the water was starting to come through their ceiling. I already had Graham in the truck with me, so we dropped by the house, picked up Cameron and drove over to rescue Kristina's daughter. Honestly, I felt kind of excited and useful. I was lucky enough to have a pickup truck that's kind of high off the ground. And it was only a few months earlier that Lisa Currier and I were rescuing Camp Fire refugees from a downpour at an encampment next to Walmart. The year before that we had opened our facilities to the Red Cross after another downpour threatened to take out the Oroville dam. I had all the necessary gear to handle this kind of torrential rain, I was full of adrenaline, and felt I had things under control.

When the boys and I returned from our rescue mission, I went out to the garage to take off my rain gear and noticed the entire floor was wet from the water that had seeped in the front and side doors. In the 12 years we lived here, we saw plenty of downpours, but none had ever leaked into the garage that badly. That's when sinking feeling number one happened. Not because of anything that was happening in our garage. We really didn't have anything on the floor that would be ruined,

and it's not like we had an inch of water in the garage. It was just wet. The sinking feeling came when I thought, "I wonder what's going on over at the church?" Sinking feeling number two happened when I walked over to the church and noticed that there was standing water all along the walkway in front of the office. The hail had clogged up the gutters and there was nowhere for the rain to go. I opened the door to the office to discover about a half inch of water covering all three of the offices. Sinking feeling number three came when I toured the remainder of the church where most of our classrooms were flooded to some degree. That's when it occurred to me that there wasn't a thing I could do. I was truly helpless.

This morning's scripture is about the Apostle Peter's experience with a literal sinking feeling when he tries to walk on water. You might think, "Well yeah, that's what usually happens when you try to walk on water," but there's some important details that we need talk about leading up to that point. Jesus and the disciples had just fed a crowd of over 5,000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. After that miracle, Jesus needed to get away for a spiritual re-charge. When he came back from his break, the boat that was tethered to the shore had been blown away from the shore by strong winds. After it got dark and the disciples hadn't been able to get the boat back to shore, Jesus decided to just walk out to the boat on the water. This was at night, and when the disciples

saw him coming, they freaked because they thought he was a ghost. Jesus said, “Calm down y’all it’s just me.” Okay, he said, “Take heart, it is I have no fear.” To which Peter said, “Make it so I can walk on the water too!” Jesus said, “Okay, come on over.” Peter got out of the boat and lo and behold he was able to walk on the water too! That is until the wind started blowing again and he started to sink. He said, “Lord, save me!” And of course, Jesus reached out to rescue him. Jesus said, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?”

The story of Peter walking on water and sinking isn’t about doubt though; it’s a story about faith. When Peter steps out of the boat, he demonstrates a remarkable amount of courage and trust in Jesus. But when he shifts his focus to the windstorm, he sinks. Like Peter, we may sink when we face some of life’s more daunting challenges. However, as we are sinking, Jesus is there to rescue us. Sometimes, the danger is of our own making. Sometimes we sink simply because we had the courage to show up. Other times, we sink because we either lose sight of what’s crashing around us, or we pay too much attention to what’s crashing around us. We struggle so much with what made us sink that we fail to realize that Jesus is there extending a rescuing hand to show us that his love is greater than whatever caused us to sink.

Jesus is the Rescuer. If I remember correctly, that's one of the first things you learn in Stephen Ministry training. God is always near, not simply because we've doubted, but because we've had the faith to get out of the boat and start walking when Jesus calls us. I believe that God honors us and meets us in our lowest places. We can find hope and salvation, cry out to the Lord, as Peter did, and discover that Jesus has more faith in us than we have in ourselves. "Lord, save me!" is an acknowledgment of need. What happens next is a beautiful revelation of Jesus' heart—rescue, not shame or guilt. The Lord reaches out when we cry out, guiding us safely through storms and being there with us. May we have the courage to step out in faith, trusting in God's power and ability to rescue—not focusing on our doubts and fears, but on our courage to walk toward God.

Ready for our reflection questions? Here's what I want you to think about this week -

What motivates Peter in this story? Is he trying to prove himself to Jesus by emulating him? Is he earnest and eager, or brash and foolish—or a combination of all these things? Do you see yourself in any of his actions?

In response to the disciples' fear, Jesus says: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." What do you think Jesus means by "take heart?" Is it possible that Peter misinterprets his

message and believes Jesus is calling him to “show courage” by stepping out of the boat? Or is Jesus inviting them to “show courage” in a different way?

In Matthew 14:31, the Greek word used for doubt is *distazo*, which literally means “double-stance” or “going two ways, shifting between two positions.” This kind of relates to our “wandering hearts” theme and how Peter often takes a “double stance.” What do you think about that definition? How do you interpret Jesus’ question? Is he questioning Peter’s doubt in Jesus, or Peter’s self-doubt? Is he questioning Peter’s inability to “take heart” in the midst of the raging storm? Is he questioning Peter’s attempt to show bravado—by asking Jesus to command him to step out?

I want you to take two snapshots in this story: The first is Peter attempting to walk on water. The second is Peter sinking, holding tightly to Jesus’ outstretched hand. Might these two moments represent different postures or stages in our faith in God? Maybe the first snapshot could represent a bold, but performative faith, one that attempts to prove faithfulness by trying to be like God. The second could represent a wholehearted faith, one that reaches out to God for help when the storms of life engulf us. Which posture do you resonate with the most?

May we, like Peter, passionately follow our heart with enthusiasm knowing it may not always work out. But may we also, like Peter, keep moving forward, doing our best to follow his friend and teacher, Jesus.