

Take Courage! It is I

Peter. Always impetuous, too quick for his own good. The continual foil in our Gospel stories. We are quick to judge Peter, because it's *obvious* he is not the one we want to emulate. He always says the wrong thing, does the wrong thing, leaps without thinking, or in this case – walks without thinking. But perhaps we have misjudged Peter. Perhaps we have more to learn from him than we *think*.

Jesus had fed the 5,000 plus women and children, and sent his disciples on ahead of him. Jesus dismissed the crowd, and went up to a mountain by himself to pray. He prayed until late into the night. He saw the boat a ways off on the sea because the wind had been *tormenting* their boat. Instead of calming the wind and the waves as he did in chapter 8, he left the mountain and walked on the water.

Verse 25 says that Jesus went out to them during the fourth watch of the night. The fourth watch was between 3 and 6am. Who *knows* how long the winds had been tormenting the boat? But at last, Jesus came. As he came, the winds did *not* die down, yet he made his way toward the boat.

Instead of calming the disciples, his presence *terrifies* them. They cry out in fear, "'It's a ghost!'" (Matt 14:26b). *People* do not walk on water, so it *must* be a ghost!

Immediately, Jesus says, "'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid'" (Matt 14:27). What's interesting is that Jesus doesn't say, "Hey guys! It's me, Jesus. Chill out." He doesn't *say* it's Jesus. He simply says, "It is I." And "It is I" we suppose, could be anyone.

In Scripture, "It is I" is not just *anyone*, but a particular person. "It is I" is from the Greek, *ego eimi*, when translated literally is, "I am." In Exodus 3, God appears to Moses. Moses asks what His name is. God says to him, "'I am who I am.'" As Jesus walks on the water, he speaks God's name, *I AM*. "'Take courage! I am. Don't be afraid'" (Matt 14:27).

Scripture doesn't tell us *why* Peter says what he says, but he tells Jesus to call him to himself onto the water. Perhaps it *is* courage. Why would Peter make such a challenge if he *doesn't* believe that this is Jesus and that Jesus is God? He wouldn't risk his life if he thinks he will drown!

"Come," Jesus says (Matt 14:29a).

Peter courageously steps out...and *walks on the water*! He walks toward Jesus. But then, he sees the wind and is afraid. He begins to sink.

You and I know this story. We've seen Jesus and felt courageous. We took risks and saw wonderful things happen. And then we looked down. We took our eyes off of Jesus and looked instead at the wind beating against us and were filled with fear. We knew we couldn't make it. So we question whether or not we were really called out of the boat. Maybe we never should have left the shore. Maybe we should have stayed at home.

The storm had been there. Peter knew it. He heard the call of Jesus and walked on water. When he lost Jesus as his focus, he became acutely aware of what was around him and began to fear.

Scripture, on this topic, stands in direct contrast with our American culture. We are told, "Be all that you can be." "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." *We* are to be the solution to our problems. But with this internal focus, we can begin a dark downward spiral. Psychologists will often counsel depressed clients to serve others. They need to move their focus from self to the other to begin the healing process.

For those dealing with depression, the advice to simply serve someone else may seem hopeless. Why would anyone want *me* to serve *them*, if I am so messed up, you wonder?

I was in my sophomore year of college. I had good roommates, but none of them I could call a good friend. I didn't enjoy what I was doing, I was constantly working, didn't make time for fun, saw my grades slipping, and didn't like myself. I found myself crying on a regular basis and didn't enjoy what I normally enjoyed. I felt detached from myself. When I had conversations with my roommates, I felt as if I were watching myself and not actually me. I confided in one of my roommates about how I was doing, and her response was, "Jonna, I cannot help you with your problems. You need professional help." At first, I felt frustrated that she was unwilling to help me, but soon after understood that she was right – I needed professional help, and she was no counselor.

I remember going to the school's on-site counseling center and filling out their inventory. A few questions centered around suicide. I could not say that I had thought about killing myself, but I had thought about the meaninglessness of my life. Those questions alone scared me. I needed help.

I went diligently to counseling, and sought to complete the homework my counselor gave me. "Try asking others about *their* life, about *their* day." "Baby steps," I would tell myself.

One day, I called home. I told my parents about how I was struggling. I was seeing a counselor, but thought I might need to change my major or switch schools or move home, because I was a failure. I might not amount to anything.

My parents were in shock. They thought I was impenetrable, a go-getter, fierce.

I was not. I was broken. I was ashamed because I had always held myself to high standards...and had succeeded. This time, I was not succeeding.

I distinctly remember the point of turning. After hearing me and the solutions I presented, Dad said, "If you need us to come now and pick up all your things and bring you home, we will do that. You just tell us."

I was completely caught off guard. By no means had I expected my dad to give me the blessing to quit my expensive college, only a few weeks before the end of the semester. All that money down the drain. The public pride he had in me willing to be risked. It was at that time, more so than ever, that I knew my dad loved me. He was willing to have me fail so that I could be well. "No Dad, I can make it through the semester. Don't come down and get me. I can make it," I said.

Henri Nouwen wrote in *Life of the Beloved*, "The greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection."¹ "Instead of taking a critical look at the circumstances or trying to understand my own and others' limitations, I tend to blame myself – not just for what I did, but for who I am."² When we blame ourselves for who we *are*, that is self-rejection. He writes, "Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved.'"³ "We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved or wounded us."⁴

You will encounter storms that test everything in you. You will take your eyes off of Jesus. You will be broken. But, as Nouwen writes, "The deep truth is that our human suffering need not be an obstacle to the joy and peace we so desire, but can become, instead, the means to it."⁵ Your brokenness and mine are not the end of the story.

Nestingen story

For Peter, it is when he comes to the end of himself, when he knows he is drowning and will die, that he cries out for Jesus to save him. "'Lord, save me!'" he cries (Matt 14:30). Immediately, Jesus *grabs* Peter's hand and saves him. Jesus assures him that he had no reason to doubt. Jesus called Peter onto the water; he will not let him drown.

When they climb back into the boat, the wind dies down and the disciples worship Jesus and proclaim, "'Truly you are the Son of God'" (Matt 14:33). It is *through* Peter's brokenness, when he comes to the end of himself on the water, that the disciples see Jesus. His brokenness is not meaningless; it leads them to faith.

It is in your brokenness that you come to the end of yourself, that you die to yourself. When you die to yourself, Jesus brings you to new life, and your brokenness can bring healing and faith to others.

Hear this word of God to you from Henri Nouwen. "'I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own and I know you as my own. You belong to me...Nothing will ever separate us.'"⁶

"Take courage. I am. Do not be afraid.'" Amen.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, 31.

² Nouwen, 32.

³ Nouwen, 33.

⁴ Nouwen, 36.

⁵ Nouwen, 95.

⁶ Nouwen, 36.