

Why Do You Doubt?

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Theme Statement

In a second storm-at-sea story, Matthew encourages growth in faith through the example of Peter, who at first confidently accepts the risks of faith, yet still falters when fear and doubt compromise his focus on Jesus.

Exploring the Word

The focus passage reprises a previous story (Matthew 8:23-27; see session 2) of a fierce storm threatening the lives of disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. In this version, Jesus is not in the boat with them but is seen walking toward them on the water. This story has parallel versions in Mark 6:45-52 and John 6:15-21, but only Matthew tells of Peter, who at Jesus’ command steps out of the boat and walks on the water toward Jesus.

Matthew 14:22-24 Alone on the mountain and the boat

The introductory verses of the focus passage establish the context in which Jesus is separated from the disciples by a substantial distance. He is “up the mountain” (v. 23) and they are out on the water “far from the land” (v. 24), a phrase that translates the Greek *stadia* (plural), a single *stadium* being a unit of measure of about two hundred yards. We are to understand that there is a great physical distance separating the disciples from Jesus. Matthew likely signals a spiritual distance as well, with Jesus focused on God in prayer as the disciples were “battered” by their circumstances (v. 24).

Matthew 14:25-27 Jesus walks on water

There are several passages in the Hebrew Bible where God is said to be walking, stepping on, and even trampling the sea (for example, Job 9:8; Psalm 77:19; Habakkuk 3:15), indicating that Matthew is presenting a theophany, a visible manifestation of Jesus’ divinity, to the disciples in the boat.

With a response typical of biblical theophanies, the disciples are struck with dread, less afraid of the weather than they are “terrified” by the apparition they see walking toward them. Not unlike Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, he is not immediately recognized.

Another feature suggesting that this is a theophany is when Jesus says, “Take heart, *it is I*, do not be afraid” (v. 27, emphasis added). “It is I” translates *egō eimi*—literally “I am”—the Greek version of the word God speaks at the burning bush when Moses asks God’s name (Exodus 3:14). God is “I AM,” and Jesus manifests God to the disciples when he says, “*Egō eimi.*”

Matthew 14:28-33 Faith falters

Peter initially acts without fear, stepping out of the boat and onto the water, trusting that if it is Jesus, Peter can do what is asked. Seeing that Jesus is doing what only God has done, Peter trusts that Jesus can empower him to do the same. But then he falters. He does not fear; he doubts. Whether he doubts that the apparition is really Jesus or doubts his own capacity to walk on water is unclear.

The word translated here as “doubt” is *distazō*, found nowhere in the New Testament except in Matthew’s gospel, and it is a significant word for him. In addition to the focus passage (v. 31), it occurs after Jesus’ resurrection when there are still “some” disciples who doubt, even though others worship Jesus (28:17). It is noteworthy that in both cases doubt and worship are paired, worship being the opposite of doubt and signaling a sure and certain knowledge of the identity of Jesus.

The Word Today

If you are someone with a tendency toward motion sickness, you know that one way to deal with it is to be sure

you have a seat in the car or on the boat where you have an unobstructed view of some point out on the distant horizon. When your eyes take in a wider vista, instead of the perception of movement being sickeningly dramatic within a narrow field, the movement is minimized against that larger field.

Something similar is true about yoga. A basic yoga instruction is to keep your eyes on a fixed point out ahead of you in order to keep your balance.

This practice also seems to hold true when it comes to faith. Peter started to struggle only when he noticed the strong wind. When his attention shifted from his fixed point, Jesus, to the turbulence around him, he was sunk. Perhaps that is what it means to have little faith: not keeping our eyes on a fixed point and instead putting ourselves at the whim of surrounding conditions. This is not to say that being faithful means we don’t take notice of, or take seriously, the turbulence surrounding us. Rather, we discipline our vision so that the turbulence loses its power to upend us.

In the past year and a half there has been no small measure of tumult. The boat that is the church has been battered by the waves of the pandemic. Many churches were placed in the equivalent of dry dock while worship, ministries, and pastoral care services went online. The church was asked to step out of their boats and walk through the wind and waves, to do something risky and unfamiliar. Faith demanded that the church stay focused on God, Jesus, and the gospel as fixed points.

As individuals, we have been similarly battered by those waves. It was hard to look around at the magnitude of change, disruption, and loss and not cry out, “Help us, Lord; we are perishing!” But it is important to notice that

Jesus did not calm the storm in order to make it possible for Peter to more easily make his way across the water. It wasn't until Jesus and Peter got into the boat that the wind ceased. Peter was called forth right into the roiling waters, protected from sinking if only he would keep his focus on Jesus.

Faith makes just this demand on us, insisting that we keep our eyes trained on the One who unfailingly comes to our aid and beckons us, "Come."

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. How do you keep balance in your life? What does it feel like when you've got it?
2. What does *doubt* mean to you? Outside of a biblical context, if you doubt someone or something, what restores your confidence?

Exploring the Word

1. Why do you think Matthew includes the detail about Jesus going to the mountain to pray?
2. Compare Matthew 8:23-27 and Matthew 14:22-33. What elements do they have in common? If Matthew reprises the storm-at-sea story to show how the disciples' faith is changing, what do the differences in the two stories tell you about the markers of growth in faith?
3. The focus passage for this session is the third time in this study we hear Jesus call his disciples people of "little faith." Reread Matthew 6:30; 8:26; and 14:31. What question does Jesus ask each time? What does being of "little faith" mean to Jesus, and how does he encourage growth in faith through these stories?

4. Matthew uses the word *proskyneō*, "worship," more often than any other gospel writer. Read all the following verses, paying attention to their contexts: Matthew 2:2, 8, 11; 8:2; 9:18; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17. Not all will actually use the translated word "worship." What do you think Matthew wanted his readers to know and imagine when he used *proskyneō*? How does the wide range of use influence your interpretation of "worship" in the focus passage (14:33)?

The Word Today

1. How is worship a fixed point against waves of doubt?
2. Reread Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31. What have you learned about what diminishes faith? What have you learned about what increases your faith?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, we commit ourselves to keeping your faithfulness as our fixed point so that our own faith can grow. Free us from our doubt so that when you beckon us to come, our lives will reveal you to the world. Amen.

Further Study

Psalm 69:1-2, 14-15; Psalm 107:23-32; Isaiah 43

Daily Readings

M. Isaiah 38:16-20	F. Matthew 14:34-36
T. Matthew 14:1-12	S. Mark 13:9-12
W. Matthew 14:13-21	S. Matthew 14:22-33
T. John 6:22-29	

Memorization

Matthew 14:31

You of little faith, why did you doubt?