

## Seeing Ghosts Coming

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*Scripture:* Matthew 14:22-33 (read originally in the Common English Bible translation)

The narrative of Matthew 14:22-33 has multiple scenes over a few verses. For those of us that grew up in the Church, or who have been in the Church for a long while now, this is a familiar story. Some of us might even say that we know this story well. But, do we? I mean, I get it. There is no way you can avoid the whole Jesus-walks-on-water, or Peter-almost-drowns part of the story. A traditional way to read and interpret the gospels, and especially this story, is to invite a congregation to identify themselves:

- With the disciples, in a boat, facing strong waves, going through a bad night, and a ghost coming
- With Peter, who perhaps challenged Jesus, and is faced with his own lack of... confidence, yes let's call it lack of confidence
- Or, again, with the disciples, and their reaction to an awe-inspiring moment with Jesus.

All of this is fine and good. And we will do some of this. However, I'd like for us to focus on Jesus.

The lesson for today begins with the phrase "Right then." If you ask me, a very telling phrase. It suggests hurry, swiftness. It reminds me of turning off the lights of a common space. In every congregation I had the honor of pastoring, I remember that on more than one occasion I strategically turned off lights either in the sanctuary or the fellowship hall. Folks were lingering—a good sign if you ask me—sometimes. Jesus, however, was in a hurry to be alone.

There are two things about the community to which Matthew was writing this gospel that are important to remember as we approach this text. First, most of Matthew's church was a community of people that were forced into exile by the government of the time. This was a discriminated community—a marginalized ethnic group in the many places they arrived after exile. And the discrimination was not only ethnic but it was also religious. The leaders of the religion they had practiced for most of their lives discriminated against them because of their faith in Jesus Christ. The second is that because of this situational reality—political, social, religious—Matthew wanted to encourage his community to continue its discernment about their call as a community to witness and action of the good news of Jesus: a gospel whose words and movement healed the sick, cleansed the wounded, raised the dead, and cast out demons. Matthew's community in the 1st century found itself facing the challenge of being a marginalized community called to be, in word, sacraments, and action, the co-laborers with

Jesus in the building of the kingdom of heaven come near. This is at the core of what we read in the Gospel of Matthew up to this point.

This lesson makes an important point in the encouragement to be a community that witnesses, testifies, and acts the gospel message of Jesus. Matthew describes how Jesus was intentional about carving time to be by himself. Verse 23 (in the Common English Bible version) describes this well: “When [Jesus] sent them away [the disciples and the crowds] he went up onto a mountain BY HIMSELF to pray. Evening came and HE WAS ALONE” (emphasis added)

It was not until the next morning that Jesus went to meet his disciples. It is important to ask, why did Jesus do this?

To me the answer is simple: Jesus took time to rest. This was not the first nor the last time we see Jesus seeking time to be alone, to rest and to pray. But they were few and far between. Jesus was “on” for a long time. He saw crowds. Moved to compassion, he taught them about the Kingdom of heaven come near and acted that message through healing and performing other miracles. In the midst of this preaching and healing, Jesus receives the news of the murder of his precursor in ministry, his cousin John the Baptist (earlier in chapter 14). Jesus taught of peace and love, performed acts of reconciliation and justice, and carried this news all at the same time. Jesus went onto a mountain by himself, alone, perhaps to rest, perhaps to mourn, perhaps for quiet. He was a neighbor to everyone who would approach him. However, he needed time away to be in community—with himself. You see, one cannot give what one does not have. To be for others, to be with others, starts with being... well, fully oneself!

Being a neighbor starts with oneself. It begins with a profound awareness of one’s strengths and weaknesses. To be a good neighbor one needs to be sure of one’s own abilities, capacities, and passions. And perhaps more importantly, to be a neighbor one needs to be honest about one’s sense of call, of vocation, of service, and the dilemmas they will inevitably bring. This is what Jesus did.

You see, you and I can get so caught up with the political and philosophical discussions on the issues of our time that we can, and often do, forget that those issues have faces and names, that those issues are about people and affect people. Individualism fosters a problem-solving process where one focuses on “my” perspective on the issue, or worst solely on “my issue”, forsaking solidarity and presence.

If racism is at the core of the many-headed hydra that is white supremacy, individualism is one of its main sources of nourishment. Individualism—this lack of citizenship and community that is so prevalent in American society, and often the American Church—is the mechanism in which you and I define our individual sense of social, political, even theological comfort. The smallest question or push back is perceived as a threat to that with which we, individually, are comfortable with. It is like a headwind shaking our boat. We can get so caught up in our self being threatened that salvation could be standing right in front of us, but because it does not conform to my way, my plan, my method, my theology, what many will see is a ghost.

Individualism, which is closely related to selfishness, is a condition we need to root out of our social and cultural beings if we want to be found faithful in our discipleship and pursuit of Jesus. Individualism is core to the U.S. American cultural, social, and political being. Calling it what it is will be the way to understand the difference between struggle and discomfort, effort and pain, solidarity and hegemony, between being in community and being I. There is nothing in this story, and indeed in the whole of the Scriptures we call holy, that calls for or encourages an individualist understanding of salvation. The testimony to reconciliation is communal. The testimony to the teaching and healing of Jesus is communal. The witnesses to the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus are gathered intentionally in a community, the Church. The Church is not a group of "I"s. The Church is the gathering of "we".

The good news is that salvation indeed stands right in front of us, especially when things are not going the way anyone of us thought they should go. Jesus still shares the same words with the Church today, "be encouraged! It is I, Jesus. Do not be afraid." These words come still from the human Jesus, one whose sense of vocation and service to the world was encouraged and refocused through regaining a deep sense of awareness of himself, and through remembering how much being a human hurts, especially when losing someone of significant importance, especially to violence and state-sponsored marginalization. It is that level of awareness about oneself that, if put in the service of the other, like a neighbor would, flourishes in solidarity, in presence, in advocacy, in action alongside the other, in being with and for the other.

Acts of salvation are standing right in front of us. And I am fairly certain they look nothing like many of us expected. They look like Black Lives Matter demonstrations in urban centers and rural areas. They look like small groups in church reading books about the American political and religious history of enslavement, genocide, and colonialism. They look like the local organizations that seek to bridge the gap of access for those who are going hungry. They look like communities affirming the dignity of every human being for who they are and what they will bring to the whole community. They look like the congregation that, aware of its lost connection to the community, is building it by doing very significant work in examining its communal vocation and identity with and for that community. If we remain focused on "I" what we will continue to see are ghosts. If we are intentional about taking time to gain profound awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, to examine one's own abilities, capacities, and passions, to be honest about one's sense of call, of vocation, of service, we will be able to see acts of salvation all around us and the possibility of being part of such acts of reconciliation.

Do not be afraid!

It is Jesus!

Be encouraged!