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“Afraid of the Water”

Matthew 14:22-31

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Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after dismissing the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward the disciples on the sea.

But when they saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were terrified saying, "It's a ghost" and they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; Do not be afraid."

Peter answered, "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water."

Jesus said, "Come."

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus immediately reached out and caught Peter, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Matthew 14:22-31

I cannot swim—not a stroke, not a backstroke, not a breast stroke, not a dog paddle, not at all. For a long

time, like my father, I claimed that my inability to swim is hereditary—that Youngers sink—but my sons swim, so there goes that theory. It is not that I do not enjoy the water. It is that I believe that water—more than any other place—is where people drown. I have always suspected that if I get into water deeper than my ankles then I will become one of those people.

When Carol wants to go to pool at the hotel, I pretend to be excited about having HBO. I take showers instead of baths. I vote for the mountains and not the ocean. During the movie Titanic, I repeatedly turned to Carol and said, “Look, this is what happens when people go into the water.” And it is.

In the peculiar story where Jesus tells Peter to get out of the boat and walk on the water, I am Peter’s friend standing on the shore yelling: “Get back into the boat. You are going to drown.”

Jesus just fed 10,000 from a lunchbox. He is really popular. In John’s Gospel, they want to make him king. After they have cleaned up what’s left of the picnic, Jesus insists the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead to the other side. You might think Jesus would go with them—it is four miles across the lake—and then go to pray, but the disciples are being so little help that Jesus just wants them to go away. He needs a break. Jesus prays late into the night.

Out on the lake, the wind picks up. The water gets rough. The waves splash over the boat. At about four in the morning, the disciples see someone walking toward them through the storm. They are not sure what they are seeing.

Some scholars try to explain this part of the story away,

suggesting that Jesus is walking along the beach or he knows where the rocks are. Maybe it is skis, pontoons, or a surfboard. No matter what we think happened, Matthew thinks it is a miracle.

Someone yells, "It's a ghost!"

Jesus says, "Hold on. It is me. Don't be afraid."

Peter, suddenly brave, says, "Jesus, if it's you, just tell me to come to you and I'll do it."

Jesus says, "Come on."

That is good enough for Peter, who steps over the edge of the boat and takes a couple of steps, but then he looks down at the waves and loses his nerve: "What am I thinking? I must be nuts. I'm going to drown."

He cries, "Save me!"

Jesus grabs his hand, "You'll be okay. Why didn't you believe? What got into you?"

The disciples say, "You're God's Son for sure!"

The wind dies down, but the point of the story is that the wind keeps coming back. The storms keep surrounding us. The world is scary—all kinds of thunderstorms, tornadoes, hurricanes.

In *The World According to Garp*, the Garp family lives on the beach. Whenever the children go out into the ocean for a swim, their parents warn them, "Watch out for the undertow." That stretch of beach has a problem with a treacherous undertow.

One day the mother and father see the youngest member of the family walking along the beach looking into

the shallows.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for the undertoad.”

He thought he had been warned about a slimy aquatic beast of a toad underneath the waves waiting to pull him under. From that time on, whenever any member of the family would venture out, not only into the water, but into any frightening endeavor, they would say, “Watch out for the undertoad.”

The undertoad is any danger that threatens to drag them under when the winds start to blow. Some days it feels like the world is trying to pull us under. Our boss is a bully and does not know it, the worst kind of bully. Our job is hard and unfulfilling.

We cannot remember why we thought the job was a good idea. Or worse yet, we lose our job. We lose our sense of purpose. We lose a friend. We lose someone we love.

We have financial problems. We have relationship problems. We have a child who is struggling. We have parents who do not want to be parented. Sometimes we feel like we are alone in the boat, and the storms are never far away.

We want to throw in the towel, wring our hands in despair, and give in to the negativity of the moment. We are ready to quit, but we feel like there is nowhere to go. Our culture encourages us to give up, and give in to despair. Our culture promotes anxiety and belittles hope. People think despair, relativism, and irony are signs of intelligence.

If you watch the Tony Awards tonight, you could get

the impression that every boat is sinking. Broadway is filled with tragedies. *Leopoldstadt* is a heart-wrenching play about a World War 2 era Jewish family, many of whom die at the hands of the Nazis. *Prima Facie* comes with a trigger warning. A criminal defense attorney must rethink her views after she is sexually assaulted. *Good Night, Oscar* is the true story of Oscar Levant's struggles with mental illness. *Life of Pi* is about a boy trapped in a storm on a life raft. He survives the shipwreck, but his family does not. This year's shows take the storms seriously—war, anti-Semitism, misogyny, mental illness, and death.

The revivals are depressing, too. *Parade* is a painful story of anti-Semitism. In Atlanta, in 1913, Leo Frank is arrested, sentenced, and lynched for the rape and murder of a teenager. The play concludes that he was the innocent victim of prejudice. *Sweeney Todd* is murder and revenge. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* ends with a suicide. *Funny Girl* ends up with a rained-out parade as Fanny and Nick go their separate ways.

Many of the shows that have been on Broadway for years have elements of tragedy. Hamilton dies in *Hamilton*. Mufasa dies in *The Lion King*. A girl ends up trapped in hell in *Hadestown*. And those three are musicals.

Three new shows—*Kimberly Akimbo*, *Fat Ham*, and *New York, New York*—have 22 Tony nominations and seem to fit the pattern of despair.

Kimberly Akimbo has a disease that causes her to age four times faster. Her life expectancy was 16. She is aging fast and surrounded by adults who never grow up—a hypochondriacal mother, an irresponsible father, and an aunt who is a tornado of bad ideas.

Fat Ham is Shakespeare's Hamlet set at a North Carolina barbecue, a backyard celebration of Juicy's mom's marriage to his uncle a week after the death of his father. The father's ghost demands that Juicy, a queer, black, Southern, college kid,

avenge his murder. Juicy asks, "What do you do when God don't want you and the devil won't have you?" The play deals with homophobia and the inherited trauma "of black men going in and out of prison since the Civil War."

New York, New York is based on the movie of the same name set just after World War 2 with Robert DeNiro and Liza Minnelli, musicians with big dreams that are not coming true. They want music, money, and love and they do not get them.

These three plays have enough despair to fit a culture that leans in the direction of despair—disease, crime, murder, racism, homophobia, greed, and shattered dreams. But each show unexpectedly chooses not to give up, not to give in, and to leave room for hope.

The 1977 movie New York, New York ends with the star-crossed lovers breaking up. They do not make it, but the new musical has a loud, happy ending. If they "can make it there, they can make it anywhere," and they do. Isn't changing the ending an interesting choice?

In the original Hamlet, nine of the eleven characters die. Fat Ham is supposed to be the same tragedy, but Juicy does not want to go down the same road as his father. He longs for hope, love, and joy. "To be or not to be"—he wants to be. In the retelling, there are two deaths, still too many, but significantly less than nine. Why would the playwright

make the most famous tragedy hopeful?

Kimberly Akimbo ends not with Kimberly's death, but with a love scene between a tuba-playing, high school über-nerd and a sixteen-year-old girl who looks like his grandmother. She has figured out how to live each day to the fullest and to have an adventure while she can. The sun shines through the clouds. Hope overcomes tragedy.

What is the cause of Broadway's surprising optimism? & Juliet imagines that the previously tragic Juliet did not die with Romeo, but survives and sings about it, a lot. The main characters in *Some Like it Hot*, while on the run from the mob, manage to find themselves as well as love. *Wicked* has a mostly happy ending where the Wicked Witch of the West gets to run away with her love. That is a big change from the melting green mess at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*.

One of the functions of art is to challenge the culture. Our culture is good at describing the clouds, and ignoring the sun. The 24-hour news cycle runs on despair about 23 of those hours. The best artists recognize the legitimacy of hope and the need for possibility.

We do not have to deny the problems around us to recognize the sun beyond the clouds, the peace beyond the storm, and the joy beyond despair. We should not give in. We should not keep looking down. We should look up now and then.

Do not give up, except to give up our worries and give them to God. Do not give in, except to give in to God's love, the love that is working to bring God's intentions in the world and in our lives, in spite of appearances and no matter what people say (Pavel Filipi).

Stand up straight. Get up on our tiptoes, because God is walking toward us in the storm, offering strength, hope, and the promise that the sun will shine again. The world is hard, but God is hope. When everything is falling apart, God comes in a new way of seeing things, a new sense of purpose, a new opportunity, a new friend, and a new peace.

When the storms are raging, God is with us. When we are tossed like a tiny ship, God is with us. God gently guides us to peace. To be God's people is to walk towards Christ in the storm.

When life is hard, we live in God's strength rather than the fears that threaten us. If we feel like we do not have much hope left, we focus on the little hope we have and we will have more. If we feel like we cannot pray, we can be quiet before God—which may be the best way to pray—and God will be with us. If we have nothing left, we look up and see that God is coming to care for us.

For the early church, the story of Jesus inviting Peter to walk on the water was about baptism. Surrounded by frightening storms, God invites the church to the waters of baptism, to remember that they are God's people, and to give themselves again to God's hope. When Peter starts to sink, Jesus is there. Love catches him. You and I walk and sink, believe and doubt, fear and follow, and through it all, God promises the water will not overwhelm us.

Occasionally, someone asks, "Why do we have water in the baptismal font when there's no baptism that day?"

that we are baptized, that we belong to God. We need to remember that we are God's children, given to God's hope.

Sometimes during the week, when I am the only one here, I touch the water, and mark a cross on my forehead.

I am grateful that even when it is frightening, there is hope. Maybe it has been a while since you have touched baptismal waters. After we sing the parting hymn, the font will be here. You can touch the water and give thanks for the promise that even on stormy days, God is with us.

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