

Immediately

It's not easy for a preacher to read the Bible with new eyes, especially when it comes to a well-known story like the one we have today. Personally, I try to find unconventional interpretations of the Bible, but it's hard not to tread a well-worn path.

For example, I've heard quite a few sermons, including mine, on this text that basically come down to a commendation of Peter's faith for getting out of the boat and walking on the water. The problem is, the typical sermon says, Peter takes his eyes off Jesus, and his faith falters, but Jesus is there to save him. So, the sermon concludes, be courageous, get out of the boat, but keep your focus on Jesus.

Okay, that may be good encouragement for some people to put their faith into action, but it kind of misses the point of the story. After all, when they get back in the boat, the other disciples don't congratulate Peter for doing pretty well and wish him better luck next time. The real hero in the story is Jesus whom the disciples worship, for the first time in Matthew, as the Son of God, a title closely connected with Emmanuel and Saviour. So what Matthew is trying to say with today's text is how the first disciples experienced Jesus as Emmanuel, God is with us, and as the Saviour of the world.

As I prepared this sermon, I was trying to read today's text as if reading it for the first time in my life. I read the text over and over again, and I even started reading the Gospel of Matthew from the very beginning. And I found some repeated words in Matthew such as "be fulfilled", "withdrew or dismissed" or "immediately". Such words are important for Matthew as he describes God's salvation story through Jesus.

For Matthew, Jesus is the one who *fulfilled* the Law of Moses, who *fulfilled* God's plan which was started with Abraham. That's why Jesus is called the son of Abraham in Matthew 1:1. In order to accomplish God's will, Jesus sometimes had to withdraw; he *withdrew* from murderous Herod who was searching for the child Jesus to destroy him; he *withdrew* again when he heard that John the Baptist has been arrested, and when he heard that John

was killed by Herod. John's death shows the critical situation of the world of Jesus' time and place. It was crucial for Jesus to be in tune with God's will and God's *timing*. So he prayed, prayed and prayed as we see in today's story.

The Bible says in Matthew 13:22-23, "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray." This story occurs just after Jesus learns that John has been killed.

Notice the word, "immediately". This word is also repeated many times in the Gospel. For example, when Jesus called his first disciples, the Bible says, "*Immediately* they left their net and followed him". And when Jesus healed the sick, the Bible uses the word, "*immediately*" to describe the connection between God's healing power and the quick response of the people. In today's reading, the word "immediately" is used three times in twelve verses, and the subject of the three sentences is Jesus. "When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is 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."", "When Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus *immediately* reached out his hand and caught him."

The story of Jesus walking on the water is in Matthew, Mark and John. So I compared Matthew's version with others to find out where Matthew's account differs from the others. It is noticeable that Matthew emphasizes Jesus' immediate response to Peter. In fact, Matthew is the only Gospel that presents Peter in this story. And the purpose of Peter's appearance is not about his failure or courage, but about Jesus' quick rescue regardless of Peter's lack of faith.

This story gave hope to the first Christian community, as their experience was almost the same as the disciples who found themselves in a boat without their leader. The first Christian community experienced mounting oppression under the Roman Empire, and conflict with their religious leaders – the Pharisees, scribes and the chief priests. There was always

pressure and risk in the following of Jesus Christ. And they had to deal with all the pressure and risk on their own, without direct instruction from their leader.

The image of being battered by waves, having the very wind against them, would have resonated with these early pioneers of faith. The Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans about 40 years after the time of Christ, and Matthew was written after the destruction of the temple. The temple in Jerusalem had been a grand, visible symbol of God's presence; the people of Israel felt its loss as a loss of their own identity.

All the people of Israel, including Matthew's community of Christians, were in transition, seeking a new identity. They were like a boat, losing balance and beginning to sink, asking urgent questions about God's faithfulness, will, presence and salvation, debating about how to live faithfully when the most important symbol of their faith had ceased to exist.

It's hard to recognize God's saving presence when you are holding on for dear life, especially if you are surrounded by darkness. The disciples didn't recognize Jesus at first – since he was doing something that was clearly impossible, they thought he was a ghost. And He *immediately* told them not to be afraid.

We sometimes think of God as a slow responder, as a Creator who holds off in His answers because He wants us to figure things out for ourselves, to come up with the right questions for the answers He's prepared to give. But that's not the case here – Jesus comforts his disciples immediately. Jesus doesn't let Peter drown a little in order to drive home the need to show more faith – he reaches out to his friend *immediately*.

Even in the chaos of Matthew's times, the message was, Jesus will immediately reach out his hand to those who lack perfect faith, to those who still harbour some doubt.

The good news for those uncertain times is still our good news, as we look for calmer waters in our lives, look for direction in our ministries; our help and direction from Christ is not coming by telegraph or lost in the mail – it is here with us now, immediate; all we have to do is reach out and accept it.