

Take Heart
[Matthew 14:22-33](#)

Fifth Sunday in Lent/ 29th March 2020

It feels like we're all in the same boat these days, caught in the same storm, battered by winds, strong winds. Like the disciples in the boat, this storm is swirling all around us, the winds are working against us. On Friday evening, Pope Francis spoke from an empty St. Peter's Square, absent the crowds. He offered a blessing of the city and the world, known as "[Urbi et Orbi](#)," a blessing ordinarily reserved for Christmas Day and Easter Sunday. The pope said, "We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other." The pope prayed for an end to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, saying, "Do not leave us at the mercy of the storm."¹

The disciples were all in the same boat, but Jesus was nowhere to be found. This story follows the feeding of the multitudes ([Mt. 14:13-21](#)) along the Sea of Galilee, really a huge lake. The disciples gathered the twelve baskets full of left-over bread and then Jesus put them in a boat to go to a different area of the lake. Jesus "*dispersed the crowds*" the text says—these words take on a whole new meaning these days, don't they? And then he went up the hillside to be alone. When evening came, the winds had picked up, and the boat was pushed far from land. It is now late, dark, and the winds have been howling all night. We're told that it was early in the morning when Jesus decided to join them. That is, during the fourth watch, between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., Jesus walked toward them, walking on the water. And when the disciples saw him, they screamed, thinking he was a ghost. "And they cried out in fear" (Mt. 14:26).

"But immediately," the text says, "immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid'" (Mt. 14:27). Peter, always quick with his mouth, answered, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." I wonder, did Peter really think this through? Did he really think it was Jesus? "If it is you, command me...", he says. Peter was probably stunned when he heard Jesus say, "Okay. If you insist. *Come!*"

I want to go back, though, to what Jesus first says to them. "Take heart..." There's something about these words have struck something deep in me the past week or so as we move through these challenging days. "Take heart..." There are plenty of places in the Bible where we're told to not be afraid. And if God is telling us not to fear, then I guess we should be able to trust these words, take comfort in this.

But it's not that simple.

Because we *are* afraid. Even if we had faith to move mountains (Mt. 17:20), we're still afraid. Fear is a natural, human, even faithfully honest response to what we're experiencing right now. If we are afraid, we should be able to say so, honor our feelings, and not deny or avoid them. We shouldn't see the presence of fear as a sign of weakness or lack of faith. Or, to put it differently, we shouldn't say to ourselves, "If I only had more faith then I wouldn't be afraid." I can't tell you not to be afraid. I don't have the authority, nobody has the authority to tell you not

to fear, especially when that's how you're feeling. To me, that seems abusive. And there's little to be gained from repression. But neither do I want to be overwhelmed by my fear. We can't let fear get the best of us.

That's why I've been drawn to these words. Jesus' first word to fearful disciples here wasn't, "Fear not," but "Take heart." That's something very different. Until now, I never paid much attention to this command. The Greek verb (*tharséō*) here is used only seven times in the New Testament (Mt. 9:2, 22, 14:27; Mk. 6:50, 10:49; John 16:33; Acts 23:11). Yes, it means, "take heart," but it has even stronger connotations. It means "to have confidence," it describes a "firmness of purpose in the face of danger." It means to be daring, bold. The best translation is probably "courage." The noun form (*tharros*) suggests "mettle," "guts," "spunk," "heart." To take heart is to have courage. And I like how the root of our word *courage* is the Latin word for heart (*cor*).

Courage and fearlessness are not the same. You can be fearful, but still have courage to act, to be bold, to take heart, take action. Ask any soldier. Or ask health workers waging war in our hospitals these days. This past week a dear friend sent me a message to let me know she was having a tough time, feeling overwhelmed. Linda is an overnight hospital pharmacist at Saint Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, NJ (about twenty miles west of Manhattan), a place I know well, not far from where I used to serve in Mendham and near where my father used to live. She works seven nights on and seven nights off. A person of deep faith, a Presbyterian, with a feisty spirit (born in Scotland), she told me, "...I'm sorry but if one more person sends me a 'Don't worry' Bible verse I'm going to...!" On Friday, she shared this reflection with her friends on Facebook, and I have permission to share it with you. "A week ago, Thursday night, March 19th, it was kind of quiet. On Friday night it was the beginning of a nightmare. Now, the ICU and CCU units are full of ventilated very sick COVID-19 patients. They converted other spaces to handle the other critically ill patients." From her perspective inside a major hospital system, she said, "More infectious is the fear. I had a nurse on the phone one night. She is just lovely and we talk a lot since she is so on top of what her patients need. Her unit had just been converted to COVID19 status. [And] she whispered to [Linda], 'I don't want to do this.' There are many memes about people 'rolling up their sleeves,' the 'strength of our medical staff!!' 'People at war on the front lines.' In my experience," she said, "people have been like that nurse saying, '...what do you want me to do????!!' I didn't sign up for this.' Staff are afraid. I AM AFRAID."

Then she writes, "But we are all doing it anyway. Courage is not the absence of fear but being afraid and doing it anyway. I thank everyone in my life praying for me when I am too exhausted to do it, or to read the multitude of bible verses referenced to me." She says, "I praise the supermarket and restaurants that are open to feed me. And I hold my family close in my heart when I am unable to do it physically. I am now on my seven off and am going to read, bake, laugh, pray and not obsess over the spread of this disease. So that I can go back next Thursday with strength."

Brené Brown [recently wrote](#), "This pandemic experience is a massive experiment in collective vulnerability. We can be our worst selves when we're afraid," she says, "or our very best, bravest selves. In the context of fear and vulnerability, there is often very little in between

because when we are uncertain and afraid our default is self-protection. We don't have to be scary when we're scared. Let's choose awkward, brave, and, kind. And let's choose each other."²

Have courage. Take heart. Without denying our fear, Jesus summons something deep in us to come alive, something strong and brave, something he knows is already inside us, he invites us to find it and then use it. In love he calls out from within us that which is needed for the living of these days.



Julius Klever (1850-1925), *Christ Walking on the Water* (1880).

¹ Pope Francis, "Urbi et Orbi," 28 March 2020. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/urbi-et-orbi-pope-coronavirus-prayer-blessing.html>. Pope Francis based his meditation on Mark's version of the storm, Mark 4:35-41.

² Brené Brown's Blog, March 21, 2020 <https://brenbrown.com/blog/2020/03/21/collective-vulnerability/>.