

Someone asked me recently if I ever get bored reading the Bible. It was a genuine question asked in curiosity and perhaps there had been times when they had read the Bible themselves and found it to be difficult to engage with. Anyone else willing to admit they've thought the Bible was boring? . . . Thank you for your honesty! But I reassured this person that, no, I don't get bored. Scripture may be thousands of years old, but it is relevant to the problems we have today, and it's so very, very human. It's got more adventure and passion than the Odyssey. It's more magical mystery than Harry Potter. It's more scandalous than a romance novel.

The Bible has a talking donkey, and a man who's bullied about his hair loss, and dysfunctional families, and murder, and hope in the midst of tragedy. It's got shipwrecks, and battle scenes, and beautiful women who manipulate the men in their lives.

Why would you read anything else?

Today, we pick up right where we left off last week. To recap, John the Baptizer, Jesus' cousin, has been executed and Jesus has just learned of it earlier *that* day. He is still processing the news and grieving. In last week's story, Jesus had gotten into a boat by himself to be alone. But he could see the thousands of people on the shore and had landed his boat, ministered to them, and fed them all by his hand.

But now, it's even later in the evening. The people have been blessed and fed. Now Jesus wants to be alone again, and that's where our story for today begins. Hear these words from Matthew's gospel, in the Message translation.

²²⁻²³ As soon as the meal was finished, he insisted that the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he dismissed the people. With the crowd dispersed, he climbed the mountain so he could be by himself and pray. He stayed there alone, late into the night.

²⁴⁻²⁶ Meanwhile, the boat was far out to sea when the wind came up against them and they were battered by the waves. At about four o'clock in the morning, Jesus came

toward them walking on the water. They were scared to death. “A ghost!” they said, crying out in terror.

²⁷ But Jesus was quick to comfort them. “Courage, it’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

²⁸ Peter, suddenly bold, said, “Master, if it’s really you, call me to come to you on the water.”

²⁹⁻³⁰ He said, “Come ahead.”

Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, “Master, save me!”

³¹ Jesus didn’t hesitate. He reached down and grabbed his hand. Then he said, “Faint-heart, what got into you?”

³²⁻³³ The two of them climbed into the boat, and the wind died down. The disciples in the boat, having watched the whole thing, worshiped Jesus, saying, “This is it! You are God’s Son for sure!”

This is the word of the Lord - the dramatic, interesting, word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

There are so many reasons this story feels real to me, despite the physics-defying magic. Number one, Jesus is grieving, and that’s something we can all relate to. He wanted to be alone earlier in the day, so he got into a boat by himself. Now, he’s trying the opposite. Put the disciples on a boat and go up on a mountain. Anyone ever needed to do something like that when they’re grieving? Try different environments? Get out of the house for a while, to get away, but then maybe go back inside and kick everyone else out? Or go to the beach, but then go to the woods? Curl up in bed one day but refuse to go to bed that night?

And secondly, he can't sleep. I imagine he's praying and crying. I imagine the memories that come swirling back about their childhood as cousins, and their bar mitzvahs and their growing passion about spirituality and politics. I imagine he remembered his baptism and his cousin's smile.

And I imagine there were also thoughts, and guilt, and fears swirling around in his head as he wondered if he did the right thing by not rescuing John from Herod's prison when he first heard about John's arrest.

And I imagine he realized that others in his inner circle would suffer for his sake. John would not be the first who believed in Jesus to suffer a cruel fate.

And much like Peter Parker in the Spiderman movies has to decide whether or not to risk the safety of his friends and family knowing his secret, Jesus has to come to grips with the danger that he puts others in by being both human and divine. It's a heavy burden. To quote Spiderman, "With great power comes great responsibility."

So after serving up dinner, Jesus still needs some alone time. He "*insisted* the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side." Then he dismisses the crowds - the thousands upon thousands who were in a deserted place and had just witnessed many miracles. And then he goes up the mountain to pray.

And he's up til four. Now, the Bible doesn't say he stayed awake til four, but he probably wasn't able to get to the mountaintop til very, very late at night. Remember, the disciples had asked Jesus to send the crowds away as evening was approaching. Then, he fed them, then they gathered up the leftovers, and then Jesus dismissed them. And you all know how long you some of you linger in Fellowship Hall after church is over. Jesus may have dismissed them, but it might have taken another hour for them to all shake his hand have a cup of coffee. So, you can imagine what time it is when he finally heads up, alone.

But then, at around 4 a.m., he is ready to return to his disciples. Why then? Why in the most unholy hour of the night?

4 a.m. is brutal. I've done enough youth lock-ins with teenagers who sneak in caffeinated drinks to know that 4 o'clock is the hardest of hours. I was been on-call as a hospice chaplain for ten years and I know that 4 o'clock is the hardest of hours.

I mean, how many of you spend much time awake at 4 a.m.? It's not an hour most of us see. Usually, those up at 4 a.m. are bakers, or have third shift jobs, or maybe they have a medical condition, or their heads are spinning with worry or grief and they can't sleep. Being up at 4 a.m. is not something we strive for.

At least, I hope not. But when I was nineteen and twenty years old, my alarm went off at 4:15 most mornings. I got up and joined my fellow teammates, and we headed to the lake, and climbed into a boat, because I was on the Vanderbilt rowing team. More mornings than I can count, I'd be on the water before the sun ever came up. Sometimes the winds were strong, but I never saw a person walking toward us on the water. Just ducks trying to outpace us.

So, in my mind, I can feel the rocking of the boat as the winds pushed it away from shore. I can envision the darkness and the shadows. But I still laugh when I read that the grown men, many of them trained fishermen, screamed in terror that they had seen a ghost as Jesus approached the boat.

But none of us are mentally at our best at 4 a.m. I have to cut them some slack. It's been a long night.

And then comes the only dialogue in our story. The loaded and possibly sarcastic and faithful and faithless and very human dialogue. I read the Message translation, but there are many others out there that you may have memorized differently.

Jesus assures them he's not a ghost and repeats the line we all need to hear, all the time – "Courage, it's me. Don't be afraid."

But then, Peter, in his very true-to-form way, says, "Master, if it's really you, call me to come to you on the water."

Now, I can see this in a variety of ways. Peter might be testing this ghostly vision. I mean, he does start with, “*if it’s really you . . .*,” but maybe Peter’s seen Jesus do so much that he believes what he asks is truly possible and he’s just wanting to try water-walking himself.

And I love Jesus’ response. “Come ahead. Come on.” It’s been a long day and night. A tough, emotional day. And I don’t know if he’s frustrated that the disciples are still not believing what they’re seeing, or he’s proud of his student, Peter, for his brave and bold request, or personally full of confidence that he can keep Peter’s head above water, but the point is, he invites Peter to come.

And then, most of us know what happens. Peter jumps out of the boat. (Not the last time that’s going to happen with our impulsive friend.) And he is able to walk on top of the water. It must be an incredible feeling. Maybe the water is dense like rock, or a bit squishy like mud. I don’t know, but he’s doing it. He’s experiencing a miracle physically.

And then, the Message translation says, “He lost his nerve and started to sink.”

No shame in that. We’ve all been there metaphorically. Life distracts us and fear is louder than faith and we are back to reality again. Gravity is real. Physics is fact. We don’t walk on water.

But you know what amazes me, though? What amazes me is what the rest of the disciples say when Jesus and Peter get into the boat and the wind and waves immediately calm down. It says, “The disciples in the boat, having watched the whole thing, worshiped Jesus, saying, ‘This is it! You are God’s Son for sure!’”

Why was it this moment that seems to have really convinced them? Why wasn’t it the feeding of the thousands just a few hours ago, or the healings in the crowd an hour before that? Why wasn’t it the brilliant and profound parables he preached?

For whatever reason, they believed. At 4 a.m., a time nothing good tends to happen, they had an epiphany. As hard as it was to think clearly due to the exhaustion and see clearly because of the darkness, their eyes were opened. Imagine what that 24

hours was like for Jesus. To hear about his cousin's death. To grieve. To have compassion on thousands who were hurting and searching for the Messiah. To heal those who were sick. To feed them and to teach the disciples about scarcity and abundance. To continue to grieve even in the midst of it. And then to choose to walk across the lake and watch his prized student take his first miraculous steps and then hear the testimony of eleven others confess him as the Son of God. What a day.

You know, last night, it occurred to me. If there was a moment, even just a moment, when Jesus wondered in his grief and doubt if anyone else would ever believe in him, trust in him, after he had essentially "let" his cousin die in Herod's prison, he got his answer at 4 a.m. Peter believed enough to risk his life. Peter jumped out of the boat in faith, in a storm. Yes, he sank after a few steps, but John the Baptizer had also asked, from prison, "Are you the one we've been waiting for, or not?" Try as we might, none of us believe perfectly all the time. That's not the goal anyway.

As Anne Lamott said, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."

I think there was a lot of faith expressed that night - Peter's faith in Jesus. Jesus' faith in Peter. And Jesus' faith in God and the journey he was on. Not because they were all perfectly at peace and confident, but because nobody seemed too certain. And yet they let the grief, and the anxiety, and the doubts be expressed, without condemnation, until the light of day returned.

I hope Jesus and the disciples got some sleep after the sun came up. I'm tired just thinking about the night they had. Amen.