

## How To Be Human: Take Heart

*A sermon preached on Matthew 14:22-33 on Sunday, August 9, 2026,  
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

You only have to look to this summer's movie theater box offices for evidence that stories of the sea are timeless. Thousands of years so, if *The Odyssey* has anything to say about it. Not to mention other films about the sea: *Jaws*, *Titanic*, *Finding Nemo*, *Moana*, and the like. Add to these the fictional classics like *Moby Dick*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Life of Pi*, and when it all adds up, there's a story to tell and retell of people drifting on the seas with nothing but a boat beneath.

### II.

So let me ask – what happens in the human spirit when you are on the water? What does it feel like when around you, the waves are undulating and the sea is everywhere you turn? For some, you may experience the sheer delight of wind in your hair and fresh breeze on your face, alive all over again. For others, who are you kidding – immediate seasickness in all that undulating! But for all people on the water – whether you're enchanted or indifferent or miserable – we share a curious sense of being ungrounded. Adrift. Everything's rocking and swaying, which means everything feels a bit tenuous and shaky. Because that's the thing with life on a boat – you're never not moving. That water is always shifting. It's not static. There's no "ground beneath your feet" upon which to reliably step. There's no comforting stability found one foot after another.

It's disorienting enough to be on the water during daytime, where at least you can see the stretch of sea and know what it is you're facing. But

what of the night, when you can hardly tell where the sky ends and the sea begins? What of the late night, when the hour heightens all the sounds and shadows? What of a late, cloudy night, when not even the stars can offer illumination to the inky blackness? What of the late, cloudy, stormy night? You think you're already a little off-kilter on a boat in the sun, but in the dead of night during the torrent of a sudden, violent storm?

This one is a doozy. A furious energy from the heavens swings the boat wildly from one side to another, sea billows rolling with every breath. The winds slosh your shipmates one into another. Terror crushes your throat like a fist, and you're certain you're going to drown. Such a raucous display is enough to unravel you. It's only when the lightning strikes that you can finally see the hand in front of your face. This kind of night is enough to make you wild in mind, conjuring images of God-knows-what in your fear. This kind of night is enough to make you think you see a man walking on the water just up ahead.

The only explanation was that it was a ghost. Eyes playing tricks on you. Fear taking over. Humans can't walk on water! But there he was, moving your way with confidence and heart. He knew this sea better than you, though its contours and shapes were known to your fishermen's sensibilities. You'd crossed it several times together, moving back and forth from place to place. And even before tonight, you'd sensed that there was something more to these crossings. They were familiar but new, like there was something you were supposed to learn or discover about yourself, about him, about this life along the way.

The storm, though, that was familiar. It wasn't that long ago that this very same scene unfolded. You with your friends in the boat. A night. A

terrifying storm. And him, maddeningly asleep right over there at the stern, until he awoke and calmed it with his words. But this time, he sent you on out ahead so he could have some time alone. Time to pray. Time to recenter after the thick work of feeding the crowds and teaching with stories and seeds. This time, you and your friends are all alone until that mirage, that ghost that terrified you just about as much as the storm that battered your boat on every side. “Dear God, be good to me,” you pray. “The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small.”<sup>1</sup>

But you know that voice. You’d know it anywhere. Like the sound of hope and comfort and freedom, all rolled into one and covered in love. Just as you and your friends wailed in the utter fear of the moment, you heard it! You heard him. “Take heart!,” he hollered. *Tharseo*. He said that often, that summons to courage, the pull away from the collapse of despair. “Take heart! It is I.” *Ego eimi*, he says. It is I. I am. I am who I am. Those words that have brought comfort for generations comforted you still. “Take heart! It is I. Do not be afraid.” There it is. His best line.

Just as you feel a warmth drop into your belly, just as your shoulders loosen for the first time, you hear a friend holler back as another crack of thunder rolls around the bay. “If it really is you, Lord, bring me out there to you.” Of course it was Peter. It’s always been Peter. See-it-to-believe-it Peter. I’ll-build-three-tents -on-the-mountain-to-stay-with-you Peter. Hot-headed in one moment, and a rock in others. No surprise that he the one who needs more in order to trust. And no surprise that after a step or two in that wild storm, he looked down, lost his nerve, and sank like the stone he is.

---

<sup>1</sup> Breton Fisherman’s Prayer.

But that Jesus. That Jesus, he never fails to catch us. That's what he did to Peter, right there in that storm, even when Peter doubted it was him in the first place and hesitated. For you see when Jesus climbed into the boat at last, the winds immediately quieted. The noise stopped rushing in our ears. All was calm and bright, if just for a moment. Who could not marvel at such a man? Truly, he is the Son of God.

For just as he did before, he was there! He was there with us. With us in the storm. With us on the boat. With us in our doubt, our hesitation, our failures. With us in our fear and terror. With us when we were certain we'd drown. With us with a word: "take heart! It is I. Do not be afraid." "Why do you doubt?" he asked Peter. In that moment, I wanted to holler, "look around, Jesus! Do you see what's happening here??" But now I wonder if he meant, "why do you doubt *me*? Why do you doubt that I am with you, for you, in you, and around you?"<sup>2</sup> These crossings, they're teaching me something. That no matter the storm, Jesus will be with me. Jesus comes near when I'm scared. Jesus gets close even when I doubt. Jesus puts me in the boat with others to shoulder the load. He doesn't shame my fear, or chasten my anxiety, or ridicule my panic. Rather, he reminds me that he is in my every boat. He is with my every step. He faces down my every storm. The old world is passing away, and the kingdom of God has come near. *Take heart!*, he says. *It is I. Do not be afraid.*

### III.

So let me ask – what happens in the human spirit when you are in an ungrounded place, a season adrift when it feels like everything around you is tenuous and shaky? Because that's the thing with life in a nervous, anxious,

---

<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas, *Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ*, p90.

unstable place. You're never not moving. That water is always shifting. There's no "ground beneath your feet" upon which to reliably step. There's no comforting stability found one foot after another.

It's disorienting enough to be in that place when you've got your head on straight, where at least you can see the stretch ahead and know what it is you're facing. But what of the night, when you can hardly tell where reality ends and deception begins? What of the late night, when the hour heightens all the sounds and shadows? What of the late, cloudy night, when not even a good therapy session, a small delight, a conversation with a friend can offer illumination to the inky blackness? What of the late, cloudy, stormy night? You think you're already a little off-kilter during these troubled times, but in the dark night of your soul, when despair and dread and panic strikes like a sudden, violent storm? *What then?*

This one is a doozy. A furious new diagnosis shreds your expectations and sends you swinging wildly from one side to another, your soul's billows rolling with every breath. The soured relationship and persistent stress slosh your family one into another. Terror of the future, of all that AI might change, of all the ways our bodies change, of money that never seems to be enough, of a new school year, of threats to democracy, to our planet, to human rights, to your livelihood – all of it crushes your throat like a fist, and you're certain you're going to drown. Such trepidation is enough to unravel you. It's only when the lightning strikes, when the wind shifts enough so that "your heart can do what needs to be done and your lips can say what needs to be said,"<sup>3</sup> that you can see clearly your metaphorical hand in front of your face. This kind of fright is enough to make you wild in mind, conjuring images of

---

<sup>3</sup> Beautiful phrase from my dear friend, Rev. Scott Dickison.

God-knows-what in your fear. This kind of fright is enough to leave you scanning the horizon, wrenching your ears for a sound, desperate for hope when it feels like you're being battered from every side. "Dear God, be good to me," you pray. "The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small."<sup>4</sup>

It can't be a mirage. Because you know that voice! You'd know it anywhere. Like the sound of hope and comfort and freedom, all rolled into one and wrapped in love. "Take heart!," he hollers. "It is I. Do not be afraid." There it is. His best line.

Just as you feel a warmth drop into your belly, just as your shoulders loosen for the first time, you hear yourself holler back as another crack of thunder rolls around your life. "If it really is you, Lord, bring me out there to you." Of course it was you. It's always been you. See-it-to-believe-it you. Need-proof-to-trust you. Hot-headed in one moment, and a rock in others. No surprise that after a step or two in this stormy life, you look down, lose your nerve, and sink like the stone you are.

But that Jesus, he never fails to catch us. That's what he's doing to you, right here in this storm, even when you hesitated. The storm out here? It's still raging. Terrifying. Hard and fearful and who knows where it's taking you. But somehow, the noise has stopped rushing in your ears. Somehow, you feel an opening where all is calm and bright, if just for a moment. Who could not marvel at such a man?

For just as he did before, he is there! He is with you. He is with us. With us in these storms. With us in our lives. With us in our doubt, our hesitation, our failures. With us in our fear and terror. With us when we are certain we'll drown. With us with a word: "take heart! It is I. Do not be afraid."

---

<sup>4</sup> Breton Fisherman's Prayer.

“Why do you doubt?” he asks us. And in *this* moment, we want to holler, “look around, Jesus! Do you see what’s happening here??” But now we wonder if he meant, “why do you doubt *me*? Why do you doubt that I am with you, for you, in you, and around you?”<sup>5</sup> These crossings, this cross, this turbulence, they’re teaching us something. That no matter the storm, Jesus will be with us. Jesus comes near when we’re scared. Jesus gets close even when we doubt. Jesus puts us in the boat with other people to shoulder the load. He doesn’t shame our fear, or chasten our anxiety, or ridicule our panic. Rather, he reminds us that he is in our every boat. He is with our every step. He faces down our every storm. The old world is passing away, and the kingdom of God has come near. *Take heart!*, he says. *It is I. Do not be afraid.*

#### IV.

For when the storms subside, when the horizon clears, when we shake out the sails and dry out the stern, when the new day dawns and the chaos of yesterday and today finds order and beauty and bright hope for tomorrow, we cannot help but to turn to one another in awe to say, “Truly, *truly*, he is the son of God.”

Amen!

---

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, p90.