

In Between Days

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 9, 2026
Covenant Presbyterian Church**

Immediately he made the disciples get into a 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. 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 them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him 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."

*Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he 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, 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 worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."
(Matthew 14:22-33, NRSVue)*

There is something peculiar about the second Sunday of August here in Athens, and here at Covenant.

Summer has begun to loosen its hold, though the heat certainly hasn't gotten the message. Vacations are ending. School supplies are stacked near the front of every store. Students are returning to campus, moving into apartments and dorms, while parents drive away from campus with strangely quiet cars.

And of course, here at church, we have reached a small threshold of our own. The "Summer Saints" series is finished. Next Sunday is Rally Day, when tables will be set out, the fellowship hall and hallways filled, and we will begin turning with renewed energy toward the coming year. But today belongs to neither season completely. It's sort of suspended between them.

These are the in-between days. The calendar is full of them, though we rarely give them much attention. We mark beginnings and endings. We tend to take photos at departures and arrivals. But the days between those moments tend to blur together – the miles on the road, the hours in the waiting room, the long stretch when one thing has ended and whatever comes next has not yet taken shape.

The Gospel of Matthew brings us into such a place this morning. Jesus has just fed a vast crowd in the wilderness. Thousands of people have eaten from five loaves and two fish, and the disciples have gathered twelve baskets of fragments from the ground. It has been a day of abundance and amazement, the kind of day you might wish could last forever.

But Jesus doesn't *let* them remain there. Matthew says that he immediately "made" the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side. The sense of the original Greek is almost *forceful*: Jesus *compels* them to leave the shore, while he dismisses the crowd and climbs the mountain alone to pray.

By evening, the disciples are far from land. Behind them, the place where the multitude was fed has disappeared into darkness. Ahead of them, the other shore remains out of sight. The wind has turned against them, and the boat is being battered by waves.

They are exactly where Jesus sent them. That detail is important, because we sometimes imagine that difficulty must mean we've taken a wrong turn. If the wind is against us, maybe we misheard the call. If the way forward is hard, perhaps we should never have left the shore. There are forms of Christian religion eager to reinforce that suspicion, promising that truly *faithful* people will just move from one victory to another, beneath calm skies.

Matthew knows better. The disciples are not in the storm because they disobeyed Jesus. They are there because they got into the boat when he *told* them to go. And now they've entered the long middle watches of the night. Their world has narrowed to wet wood, straining arms, ripping water, and a wind that pushes back against every inch they gain. I imagine they've stopped speaking except when they must. There is no energy left for conversation. They lean into the oars and try to keep the bow pointed forward.

This is *such* a different kind of time from the day they just had! On the hillside, grace had been wonderfully visible: bread multiplying in their hands, hungry people eating, *twelve baskets* filled! Here, grace is much harder to find. Jesus is absent. The shore is invisible. The work consists of rowing through darkness without any sign that the boat is getting any closer to anywhere.

You know, many passages in life have that shape. A job comes to an end, perhaps painfully, and the work that once gave structure and meaning to the day is suddenly gone. There may be no new vocation waiting with an open door, no clear sense of what to pursue or even whether *any* path will appear.

A relationship changes, and a person discovers that the future they once imagined has disappeared. A diagnosis arrives, and life is divided into before and after. A loved one dies, and the old world recedes while the grieving heart remains unable to imagine another one.

There are days when we can still see the shore behind us. We *know* what has been lost. We can name the life we had, the work we did, the person we were. What lies ahead, though, is far more difficult to see. We know only the resistance of the wind and the next necessary strains on the oars.

These passages can test something deeper than patience. They can thin our courage. At first, we might speak confidently about transition, resilience, and new possibilities. But as the night lumbers on, such language becomes harder to sustain. There may be no visible progress, no hidden purpose we can discern or even tease out, no assurance that the future will unfold according to a story we would choose.

Our wider public life carries something of this same disorientation. We live in a time when much that appeared durable has revealed its fragility. Democratic institutions bend beneath pressures we once believed they could withstand. Lies are repeated so relentlessly and without shame that even our common hold on the truth begins to loosen. Cruelty is dressed as strength, while compassion and empathy are mocked as weakness. Rights won through long struggle are treated as temporary permissions that power might withdraw on a whim.

Many people have spent years working for a more generous, just, and truthful common life, and now feel the wind driving hard in the opposite direction. And they're *tired*. Some are frightened. They can see the shore from which we have departed, imperfect as it always was, but can't see what kind of country waits ahead. Optimism feels increasingly difficult to summon.

The gospel doesn't ask us to pretend otherwise. Matthew doesn't turn the storm into a passing mood or suggest that the disciples would find the night delightful if only they had a more positive attitude. The wind is real. The danger is real. Their fear is real.

Then, sometime in the fourth watch of the night – those cold, exhausted hours before dawn – something appears on the water. At first, the disciples can't recognize it. They see only a figure moving across the surface of the sea, where no human being should be able to stand. Their fear reaches for the best explanation available to it: "It's a ghost!" And they cry out.

The sea carried enormous weight in the biblical imagination. It was the ancient image of *chaos*, the deep and untamable realm where human power reaches its limit. Israel sang of the God who set *boundaries* for the waters, who made a *path through* the sea, who ruled the raging deep. To see Jesus walking toward them across that darkness is to see more than an astonishing miracle. Matthew is showing us the authority of God moving through the place of chaos.

Jesus doesn't call to them from the safety of the farther shore. He comes out upon the very waters. And before they can understand what they're seeing, he speaks (as our reading earlier rendered it): "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

"It is I" is a perfectly natural translation, but beneath the English we might hear something larger reverberating. The words can also be heard quite literally as, *I am*. The voice of the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush now reaches frightened disciples through wind and darkness: *I am*.

Jesus offers no explanation for the storm. He doesn't tell them how much longer the night will last or how far they remain from land. He gives them his presence before he gives them the shore.

And then, *Peter* answers in the way Peter so often does – with a startling mixture of faith, love, impulse, and uncertainty. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Jesus says, “Come.”

Peter swings his legs over the side of the boat and steps down. For a few astonishing moments, he *walks*. The impossible holds up beneath him. He moves toward Jesus across the water.

But then, of course, Peter notices the wind. Now the wind was there before he left the boat, and the waves had been battering them for hours. But now he feels his full exposure to the danger, to the chaos. Fear suddenly enters the space where trust had briefly carried him, and he begins to sink and cries out, “Lord, save me!”

It may be the purest, most honest prayer Peter ever speaks. There's no attempt to sound brave or faithful. He doesn't explain himself, defend himself, or promise that he will do better. The water is rising, and only three words remain. *Lord, save me.*

Matthew says that Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches him. Immediately. Before Peter recovers his confidence. Before he understands what went wrong. Before he can make himself worthy of rescue, the hand is there.

And Jesus says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” We often hear those words as a harsh rebuke, as though Peter has failed a spiritual exam. But Jesus doesn't call him faithless. Peter has “little faith” – faith mixed with fear, trust divided against itself. Matthew uses the same unusual word for doubt near the end of his Gospel, when the risen Christ appears to the disciples upon a mountain. They see him, and they worship, and *still* some doubt – and Jesus nevertheless sends them into the world with the Great Commission.

In Matthew, hesitation doesn't cancel discipleship. Faith and fear can live for a time within the same heart. Peter can step toward Christ *and* sink. The disciples can worship *and* remain uncertain. The gospel has always been carried by people whose courage sometimes thins almost to nothing, but who remain within the grasp of Christ.

That's a word we need for these in-between days. Sure, there are seasons when faith feels strong enough to climb out of the boat, but others when it can do little more than cry for help. There are mornings when we awaken ready to face whatever comes, but also evenings when the future feels like dark water beneath our feet.

The strength of faith is not measured by our ability to remain untouched by fear. Faith turns toward Christ from within the fear. It reaches, cries, clings. And when even that seems beyond us, Christ reaches first.

Jesus and Peter climb into the boat, and the wind ceases. The disciples gather around them, soaked and exhausted, and worship Jesus: “Truly you are the Son of God.”

But notice where this happens. They *still* have not yet arrived. The farther shore *still* lies somewhere beyond the darkness. The boat has not completed its crossing. Questions about what comes next *remain* unanswered. Yet there, between the shores, they recognize who has been with them.

That may be enough for this Sunday. *Next* week, we will fill the building with signs of what lies ahead. We will speak of learning and service, worship and fellowship, justice and care. There will be plans to make and work to undertake. A new season of our life together will begin. But today we are still between the shores.

And for many of us, that’s true of our lives and our work too, and maybe some of us need permission to remain here for a while – to acknowledge that the wind has been hard, that our courage has grown thin, that the future is not yet visible.

But know this: *These days are not empty*. They are not lost time between the chapters that count. The life of God is present here, too. The disciples kneel while the shore remains hidden. Dawn has barely touched the sky. The boat still bears the marks of the storm, and Peter is still dripping with the water into which he sank. Yet Christ is among them.

And across every dark and uncertain passage, his voice still comes: *Take heart. I am. Do not be afraid*.

Amen.