

“Stay Encouraged”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Edina Morningside and Linden Hills UCC; May 21, 2023

**Matthew 14:22-31a** (MSG version, adapted)

*As soon as the meal was finished, [Jesus] 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.*

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

*Peter, suddenly bold, said, “Master, if it’s really you, call me to come to you on the water.” 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, “Jesus, save me!” Jesus didn’t hesitate. He reached down and grabbed his hand...*

Around our third week of this “Re-Shaped” worship series on themes of change, one of our Bible study participants asked just what all this conversation about change was pointing toward. “What are you preparing us for?” he asked. “Are you going to announce that you’re dropping out of ministry, that you and Javen are moving to Milaca, to buy and run the Dairy Queen there or something??” I assured the room that I had no ulterior motive; I knew of no other surprise that was going to drop. Furthermore, I’d never sell enough Dairy Queen to turn a profit—I’d eat way too much.

No, the reasons for a series focused on change are the ones in plain sight. Over recent years, we’ve gone through countless experiences of personal, communal, national, and congregational change—some by chance or circumstance, and some by choice. The biggest new change in church that we’ve been preparing for is now at hand, a sabbatical that starts after worship today. Over the coming three months, I’ll be away from the office and trying to figure out who I am when I’m not serving as your pastor. You will be led by other brilliant staff and lay leaders, also discerning who *you* are when I’m not here as your pastor.

Like all kinds of other change, this one too elicits some anxiety and uncertainty. I fear that I’ll waste the precious gift of this renewal time by not using it well, that folks here will choose to “take the summer off” and miss out on the meaningful, memorable worship ahead, or that everything will surely go to pieces without my essential presence. Remembering that the church doesn’t *need* another Messiah is probably reason enough for these periodic sabbaticals, and my ego also fears that you’ll actually do just fine or improve things without me! Because the future is especially cloudy in times of change, we feel all sorts of ways about the unknown of what’s around the corner. But God’s presence in anxious times is a big part of what the Bible shows us among disciples who have been through changing times before.

Today’s Scripture takes us from the solid ground of Jesus feeding thousands out to a wave-tossed, wind-whipped boat in the middle of the night. The disciples were scared at the weather, then even more at the sight of a ghostly Jesus walking to them on the water. But using familiar phrases—“Courage, it’s me; don’t be afraid”—Jesus reassures them that this is truly him. He soothes their frayed nerves, and the disciple Peter even feels emboldened to join Jesus on the water. The fearsome wind and waves are not diminished, but because they have history with this savior already, Peter finds new footing and experiences Jesus’ rescuing hand. Reflecting on our theme and this scripture, Marcia McFee writes of the courage it takes to make changes and break out of longtime habits. “Just like Peter,” she writes, “if we are going to change, we have to take the first uncertain steps out of the boat onto the water and into the

unknown. Luckily, we too have Jesus' redeeming help and support, his hand reaching out to us, if we start to sink or lose our way."<sup>1</sup>

This sent me thinking about all the other times that we've undertaken something new, and through fright or challenge we have experienced Jesus alongside us still. Consider: in just a few recent years, God led us through a supersized capitol campaign to fix a wall falling off the church; envisioning and realizing a new Gathering Space and Peace Garden; recruiting and equipping more volunteer and staff leaders than I can count; creating a new governance model, a new constitution, bylaws, and covenant; plus a mission trip to Kenya, and a global pandemic too! The Spirit of change led others here through the leadership shift from a beloved longtime minister to a beloved new one, facing the daunting prospect of a building unfit for ministry, sifting each thing in it to preserve and pass on physical legacy, renting office space, selling a building, and completing a church merger, all while being led by a beloved interim pastor. I'm tired just *thinking* of all these things, and yet we have done them as the church! Our presence here now is a fulfillment of what others only dreamed of or hoped for. Our existence is a testimony to God's presence in *every* time of trial and rejoicing.

Jeff, Leah, and Deb, our newest members who join the church today, you come alongside us as the latest partners in a community whose inspiration is the disciple Peter, and whose experience is of Jesus beside us through it all. You have taken a first step in calling us to accompany you on this journey of faith. And though there was a script for this part of today's service, there's no script for what comes next. We don't really know what this faith journey will involve in the coming months and years. We do know, though, that our inspiration is disciples who act like Peter. With him and the others in the boat, we might feel awe at the size of our fears, but also reassured by the words of Christ, promising "It's me; don't be afraid". I hope like Peter we too have just enough chutzpah to attempt walking on water, experience the thrill of achieving what once seemed impossible, and know the immediate accompaniment of Jesus, reaching out to rescue, when fear of the wind and waves starts to rise again within us.

It's no accident that Jesus' first word to the fearful disciples is "Courage". That's the first step—have courage—and faith assures us that the rest will take care of itself in due time. Others translate Jesus' words here as "take heart" instead of "courage"—both versions point to the presence of "heart" at the center. The English word "courage" comes from the French word "coeur", meaning "heart". Whatever tomorrow brings the church and myself, whatever umpteen steps of change lead through the new adventures that lie ahead, it begins here with courage in our hearts. Nobody needs to pretend we have courage at all times and in all situations, because God has called us together into congregations, extending courage and enacting God's presence with one another. As Marcia McFee summarizes, "If we can have courage to take steps toward change and be encouragers of one another, this is the meaning of community."

Then courage, beloveds—take heart. The future will be like the present and the past in at least one way: the presence of Jesus alongside us, in the face of neighbor, stranger and friend here. I'll follow my faith and feet in the coming days, and you do the same with yours, until we come back together again to testify to where we have seen Jesus, right there with us in the wind and the waves of change. That is, if I can get through the door after all that ice cream!

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcia McFee, "Sermon Fodder" in *Re-Shaped* (Worship Design Studio; 2023), [www.worshipdesignstudio.com/reshaped](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/reshaped).