

The disciples were not afraid until they saw Jesus.

The wind was against them and the waters were choppy, but this was not their first bout with bad weather.

What terrified them was not the sneering, whitecaps lunging at the boat but the figure in the midst of them, like a man walking but on water, getting larger, getting closer, coming right for them like the grim reaper or the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

They were used to waves and wind, prepared by experience for salty weather and stormy nights.

They were in no way prepared for an otherworldly figure stalking them across the sea.

With sleep deprived eyes in the pitch blackness of the fourth watch, how could they have known it was Jesus?

We have probably heard this story or a version of it too many times to register the impossibility and the terror of it.

Of course it was Jesus, walking on water, because that's what he does, because he's Jesus, so why didn't they recognize him?

For one thing, they hadn't heard this story before, so they had no reason to expect it to happen.

For another, it was the dead of night and the weather was nasty and they had other, more practical things to worry about than the luxury of prayer Jesus was off somewhere doing, namely keeping the boat sailor side up in the midst of pitching waves and pitch darkness.

And there is another reason, a reason we share with them.

It is hard to recognize Jesus when he appears.

Not only does he come in the strangest times, but also in the most bizarre and unwelcome ways.

He comes as a haunt in the midst of a sleepless night.

He comes as a growl of conscience in bleak situations without good options, as a relentless question in a heart groping for answers.

He comes as a needy neighbor, a hungry beggar, a desperate stranger and an all too familiar face, a figure of pity or terror whose only resemblance to anything holy is that something deep inside us warns us not to look it in the eye.

Rarely does Jesus come backlit by sunshine with soft blue eyes, a peaceful lamb cradled in his arm, a tender smile warming his face.

That's the Jesus we look for, hope for, wish for, install as stained glass as a good luck charm for the church building.

But the real story of Jesus is that he is the Son of the God who comes to Elijah not in Quake, Wind and Fire but in something far more terrifying: the center of dead silence.

It is enough to make Elijah wrap his face and answer the door without daring to step outside.

God's Son will come in much the same terrifying way, dead silent on a harrowing cross, and now, in this case, as a growing shadow in the dead of night.

And why does this ghost approach?

Why does this terrifying God come at us, and what does it want?

This is where the stories turn scarier still.

God commands Elijah to start a revolution.

Anoint a successor to an occupied throne, and one for yourself while you're at it.

The queen is already trying to kill Elijah; he's hiding in a cave more than a month's journey into the desert because he's on the lam from his last royal run-in, and now God wants him to go back out there in broad daylight and campaign against the incumbent. This is another reason we fear the real God: God is impolitely and unapologetically political. God is decidedly for the poor and against protections for the rich; God is against the new debt deal, for tax increases for those like me who are paid more money than we need, against spending cuts that punish the vulnerable, and for a socialism so radical that one successful couple in Acts 5 who tax shelters a portion of a capital gain is given the death penalty for it.

God is more interested in the common welfare than in defending individual rights, in justice than in liberty, in equity than in charity.

We who are fortunate, spoiled capitalists want nothing to do with this God and hope no one shows up on our front porch saying, *Behold, I stand at the door and knock.*

Jesus is not a comfort so much as a threat.

He does nothing in this gospel to stop the wind or calm the waves.

He says *do not be afraid* because it is what God always says because God always has to. What Jesus does do, if it really is him and this voice in the mist really can be trusted, is to summon Peter to step out of the boat.

Peter, remember, is the Greek name that means rock.

Of course he's going to sink.

Of course he's going to go down like a national credit rating.

Of course he can't walk on water because people can't do that which is why we don't try it.

It's as ludicrous a command as *love your enemies, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, sell everything you have, and take up your cross and follow me.*

Step out of the boat.

Step out of your comfort zone, your safe circle of friends, your navigable assumptions, your comfortable church, whatever little watercraft you have built for yourself to provide passage through life and the illusion of security in the howling middle of the night.

Jesus comes at us uninvited in mist and mystery, in vapors and voice, with the audacity to say, step out into the storm.

Come out of your cave, your boat, your mantle of certainty, and do the impossible: walk on the water, anoint Hazael, spit in death's face, *take up your cross and follow me.*

Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor admits that *there comes a time in a preacher's life when the queasy-making parts of the Bible can no longer be ignored, when it is time to admit that the Bible is not a Book about admirable people or even about a conventionally admirable God.*

It is instead a book about a sovereign God's covenant with a chosen people, as full of holy terrors as it is of holy wonders, none of which we may avoid without avoiding part of the truth....the very real terror of obeying God without the least idea how things will turn out in the end--which is, after all, the human situation.

Things will turn out according to God's will, certainly, and in faith we confess that to be enough for us.

But insofar as God's will is so radically different from our own, there is plenty of room left for terror in our lives....

These terrible texts remind me how helpless I am, how frail and not in charge I am.

While there are clearly things I can do to improve my life and things I can do to cheapen it, my fate is ultimately out of my hands. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Preaching the Terrors," PreachingTodaySermons.com)

At the end of our story, of course, we have no better chance in the boat than we do on the water.

In the end we all succumb to one storm or another and sink into the swirling chaos and gurgle out in desperation, *Lord, save me*, because we cannot save ourselves.

And God hears us.

God listens while Elijah whines about his plight.

Jesus listens when Peter cries out in terror.

And Jesus, the Lord who refuses to save himself, saves Peter.

Jesus, who stretches out his hand to rescue Peter, stretches out both hands on the cross to save us all.

Jesus, who summons us out of the boat and in over our skis, doesn't only approach in the midst of the storm but also gets in the boat with us.

When we fail at being divine, he dives in and becomes human.

When we fail at life, he saves us in death.

When we turn our eyes to look at the wind, he keeps his eyes fixed on us.

This is a terrifying truth for those of us who fancy ourselves the captain of our own ship, those of us like your pastor who would rather die alone than ask for help, who would rather sink than owe the favor of being saved.

Yet we dare to name this truth gospel, good news.

In the swirl of the storm, in the middle of the chilling silence, in the center of what we most deeply dread, God comes to us.

Recognized or not, trusted or not, wanted or not, our horror and also our hope, God comes.

And so we shriek, and shudder, and doubt, and worry, and wonder, and worship, and sail on toward the morning.