

“The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.” I think this quote by writer William Arthur Ward describes the mindset of the disciples of Jesus perfectly. Let me read it again. “The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.” They are realists. It’s been a long and emotional day. They see a crowd of thousands of people, the sun is setting, and since they can feel their own stomachs growling with hunger, they know that everyone is probably getting hungry. This impromptu gathering beside the water did not leave them time to contact the hospitality committee to arrange for a potluck much less a catered banquet. So, they suggest to Jesus that he might want to send people away so they can go buy something to eat in the neighboring towns. They are realists. They don’t complain about the lack of food, they don’t expect the situation to change, they are attempting to readjust to the situation at hand. We heard how this story unfolds. Jesus tells them sending the people away is not necessary, that the disciples should feed them. With what? There are thousands of people and not even enough food for the disciples to be satisfied. But Jesus takes what they do have, and it becomes an abundant feast.

It was a different sort of feast that is the reason the crowds and Jesus are gathered together in an isolated place. Herod Antipas was a ruler in service to the Roman Empire whose territory included Galilee where Jesus spent most of his ministry. Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great who had ruled over the kingdom of Judea and was responsible for what has become known as the massacre of the innocents in an attempt to execute Jesus when he was about two years old. Herod Antipas had thrown an extravagant banquet to celebrate his birthday. The party would have been attended by the elite and powerful, those serving in Herod’s court. The food would have been only the best and with more than enough to satisfy everyone’s appetite. The gathering was a display of wealth and power. Herod’s daughter performs a dance that delights Herod so much he promises to give her anything she asks for. His wife, Herodias instructs her to ask for the execution of John the Baptist who was in prison. I won’t go into all the details of her motivation for this demand but you can read it

earlier in chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel. Herod agrees and John is executed immediately.

This is where our scripture reading for this morning begins. John's disciples retrieved John's body and buried it and then they bring word to Jesus about what had happened. Jesus is clearly upset by the news and maybe even a bit worried about his own safety as he attempts to find some solitude. John's death came on the heels of another devastating event. Jesus had returned to his home town of Nazareth and taught in the synagogue there. But the people couldn't get past their familiarity with Jesus as the carpenter's son. That kid from down the street. In Luke's version of the story, the people of Nazareth are so offended by Jesus and his teaching that they try to throw him off a cliff!

Now his relative John was dead at the hands of a corrupt and vicious ruler. As Jesus gets into the boat to seek some solitary peace, it may have felt that the Empire had won. People in his hometown had not only rejected his teaching and their lack of faith makes it impossible for Jesus to do any miracles. And now, his relative John, the one who had baptized Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry, had been killed. Maybe Jesus felt defeated and was doubting his call.

But when he arrives on the shore, thousands of people have gathered to meet him. The people in his hometown synagogue might not have believed in him, but these people needed him and put their trust in him. Matthew describes the people as sick using the term *arrostos* in Greek. The term implies a sense of powerlessness or weakness – both a physical weakness and a weakness of power in society.<sup>1</sup> These are the marginalized, the dispossessed, the ones who would not be welcome at the birthday party for the one who ruled over them with force and power. But these are the ones who can imagine the type of kin-dom that Jesus has been describing. Those who have been rejected and oppressed by the worldly power of Empire, are eager to hear and believe that there is another possible reality. A kin-dom in place of a kingdom. Where everyone

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<sup>1</sup> <https://robertwilliamsonjr.com/maybe-we-could-walk-on-water/>

is a beloved child of God worthy of dignity and wholeness. The Empire offered them sickness, arrostos, as their only reality. Jesus offers them life abundantly.

The disciples seem to have a little bit more difficulty fully embracing the possibilities of God's kin-dom on earth. But I believe they do show a sense of compassion and a desire to take care of the people who have gathered. They don't want them to go hungry, they just can't imagine that there is any way for them to provide for the people's needs. It can be uncomfortable to witness great need and feel powerless to make a difference. I think we've all probably experienced that at some time or another. Whether is stories in the news of people fleeing violence in their home countries or the high levels of poverty in our own town. We feel powerless to make any lasting difference. It is more comfortable to move the problem out of sight than to be present amid the suffering. This story, like many stories in the Bible, have more power as metaphor than as literal, historical accounts. It is not helpful to debate whether or not these miracles factually happened. Whether food was multiplied in some supernatural way or if the people were inspired by Jesus to share what little food they carried with them so that all were fed. I don't know if the miracles described in our text this morning actually happened. But I know them to be true. They hold truth about the kin-dom of God and they hold truth about the ministry of Jesus. They tell us that God doesn't play by the same rules as Empire. They tell us that things we assume are impossible, are possible with God and with each other. They invite us to dare to imagine a different possibility. Not only does Jesus invite us to imagine a world where all who are hungry in every sense of the word, are fed but that there is enough food, enough resources, enough grace, enough love, enough of God's presence... to fill 12 baskets – symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel. Enough for everyone everywhere.

This lesson is immediately demonstrated as the disciples get into a boat and are suddenly in the middle of a terrible storm. Many of you, like me, might have assumed that the disciples troubled by the storm, that they are in fear for their lives. But as I read this scripture again, I noticed that there is no mention of their fear until they see Jesus on the water. They think they are seeing a ghost or a spirit and it terrifies them. When Jesus assures them that they need not fear, he says "It's me" but the words are literally

“I am” in the Greek. I Am is one of the names for God in the Hebrew Testament. When Moses asks God at the burning bush what to tell the people God’s name is, God responds “I AM.” Jesus is telling the disciples, there’s no need to fear God is with you. But Peter wants proof. “If it’s really you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus invites Peter onto the water and for a brief moment, Peter walks on the water.

Many of you have likely heard a popular interpretation of this story that we are supposed to keep our focus on Jesus. If we let our attention be distracted by the chaos of the world, by the wind and the waves of our lives, then we will sink. That Jesus scolds Peter for not having faith in him and that is why he sinks. But I want to offer two slightly varied interpretations that might seem to contradict one another but both of which I think invite us into a deeper wondering. Yes Peter has doubts. Who doesn’t? But Peter took a chance. Peter dared enough to step out of the boat in the middle of the storm and into the chaos of the waves because he believed that God was present in the form of Jesus.

I mentioned that I had two seemingly contradictory interpretations. Here’s another possibility. What if Peter’s doubts are not about whether or not Jesus has the power to make him walk on the water, but that he doubted that it was Jesus in the first place? What if Jesus is saying, I told you it was me, why did you need proof? In the midst of the chaos, do we forget to look for God’s presence with us. Do we believe God’s promise that we have nothing to fear? Do we try to rely on our individual fortitude and forget that we have partners with us in the boat? That we don’t need to abandon ship to test God’s presence. God is already there.

I find power and truth in both of these readings and I like to hold them both as equally true. We must dare to fail for something big. Jesus invites us to imagine a reality that is beyond our belief and to offer the food anyway, to step out of the boat anyway. In the midst of chaos, to believe that God’s presence is enough to bring peace. AND that we are not alone. We don’t have to chase after God because God is already here. We don’t have to send people away in their needs because God is calling us to believe that what feels impossible is possible when we come together with radical hope.

The question I think we all need to ask ourselves, as individuals, as a church, as a community, as a country is what are we too afraid to attempt because we assume it will fail. Or what feels impossible? What about our lives feels like it will never change? Where are we letting ourselves be governed by fear and the assumption that our definition of reality is the right one. Where is God challenging us to be bold, to rely on others, to seek wholeness and healing? For some of us, it might be something as personal as a relationship that feels beyond healing. Or that an abusive relationship feels impossible to leave. It might be that we are experiencing a grief or a pain that is so deep, that we can't imagine that life will ever be possible again. It might be social issues like homelessness, lack of affordable healthcare, poverty. It might be the global crisis of climate change. Are we willing to reject the lie that these things are impossible to change? Are we willing to dare to step out of the boat or to offer what feels like too little and expect the that God's presence is already here ready to calm the chaos, to satiate the hunger to lead us back to community if we but take the first step? Can we believe the impossible is possible? May it be so.