

Caught when we are out of depth

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on August 9th, 2026 – Matthew 14:22-33)

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As a young person the church I attended had many stained-glass windows. I had a favourite one, and whenever I could, I would sit beside it. Like most churches, people would sit in the same seats, so I didn't often get a chance to sit near it. The window depicted the story that we have before us today, Peter attempting to walk on water and sinking. I loved that window. I think it reminded me that we are all a bit like Peter, full of confidence one minute and then when in danger we start to flounder. I think it reminded me that even some of the great disciples fail sometimes. I think it helped me understand the disciples were a bit like me - flawed, sometimes overconfident and a bit too sure of ourselves. We all have moments of great faith and equally great doubt.

The story we have before us today is only found in Matthew's gospel.

After a somewhat exhausting few days (learning of the death of John the Baptist, trying to get some 'alone' time and then having to feed crowds of people who just couldn't stay away).

So, Jesus tries again, and wanting to get some time to himself, he sends his disciples across the Sea of Galilee in a boat, so he can go up the mountain to pray. Most of those in the boat were used to sailing, they were strong and brave fishermen. Whilst on their way to the other side, a storm is brewing, not unusual in that part of the world. Storms were frequent and could come quite quickly. The storm would not have frightened them, they'd weathered many of them before, it was what happened next that scared the wits out of them.

What frightens them is the appearance of a figure in the distance walking on the water, they think it is a ghost, or perhaps they are hallucinating or it is a figment of their collective imaginations. Then the person identifies themselves, it is a voice they know, and it speaks words they have heard before - take heart or have courage, it's me, don't be afraid. It is Jesus, they can hardly believe it! But Peter seems to need extra proof and he says - if it is really you, command me to come toward you, to walk on the water to you. Jesus invites him to come, Peter gets out of the boat and with his eyes fixed on Jesus, begins to walk on water, then he notices the wind, loses focus and starts to sink. His first reaction to this is to call out to Jesus and ask him to save him. Jesus stretches out his hand and catches him. The two of them get into the boat, the storm calms and the other disciples worship Jesus, calling him the Son of God.

There is much in this story that we could discuss, but today I want to focus on Peter.

Peter has somewhat of a checkered story. He can be impetuous. We know he denies Jesus. We know Jesus forgives him and calls him to care for his people. He becomes a significant figure in the early church.

Peter gets into the boat with the other disciples. A fisherman by training, he has been in many storms and not really frightened by them. It's not the storm that is frightening, it's the figure they see on horizon.

Like the others he hears Jesus' voice, saying it is I, don't be afraid, but they are.

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Peter is the impetuous one, he normally jumps right in, but this time he seems to be a bit more tentative. He makes a bargain with Jesus, if it is really you, call me to come to you. It's like he needs further proof that is really Jesus, he needs some reassurance from Jesus, he needs Jesus to call him. Of course, Jesus does.

He steps out of the boat and initially does very well imitating Jesus and walking on the water. Walking on water! Then for some reason he notices the storm around him, he becomes frightened, he loses his focus and before he knows it, he is sinking. He has stepped out, an act of courage but then he stops believing, stops believing in Jesus or perhaps stops believing in himself.

When exhilaration turns to panic, the first thing he does is call out to Jesus to save him. His first response is to call on God.

Despite Peter's tentative steps, when he calls out to Jesus, Jesus acts immediately, he reaches out and pulls him up, he catches him when he finds himself out of his depth.

Together they return to the boat, the seas calm and they all acknowledge just who Jesus is.

I wonder how Peter felt in this episode - did he feel like a failure? Did he beat himself up for having doubts? Was he doubting or just a little unsure? Was he angry with himself, embarrassed perhaps? Or was all that forgotten once Jesus has caught him? Did he realise that he was never alone, that Jesus always had his back?

Like Peter, we sometimes find ourselves in stormy seas. We too are insecure, fearful, disturbed, feel threatened, yearn to feel safe, feel like we need to brace ourselves against the wind, become anxious about what is next. Sometimes we feel battered by life, sometimes we can't even explain what is happening or how we are feeling, we experience lots of twists and turns, we make all kinds of bargains in our search for calm and peace.

This story provides both a sense of reassurance for us all, but also some challenges.

We are never alone when we are battered by the storms of life, Jesus is there always ready to reach out to us and catch us as we fall or sink. Even if we take our focus off Jesus, he will not take his focus off us and will be at the ready to rescue us.

Do we always recognise Jesus, especially when the going gets tough?

Are we prepared to respond to Jesus' invitation, when he says to us 'Come'?

Are we ready to be sent to the other side, into danger by Jesus? Where is Jesus sending us?

Do we have the courage to step out of the boat, even tentatively to follow Jesus, to imitate Jesus?

Do we need to be in control of everything, have prepared for every option before we step out in faith? Or are we prepared to step out into the unknown?

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The story provides us with reassurance and hope.

No matter who we are or what we have or haven't done, even if we have bargained with God, taken faltering steps, doubted or panicked, Jesus is there holding out his hand, ready to catch us, ready to hold us up when we get out of our depth.

When we are overwhelmed, Jesus is there. Even if we hesitate, Jesus will not hesitate.

If we want to test the waters, Jesus is there.

Whether we stay in the boat or step out, Jesus is there to calm our fears.

Jesus will still the storms that surround us and the world. Chaos, confusion, fear, doubt and pain do not have the last word.

Charles Spurgeon, a famous Baptist preacher from the 1800's concludes his sermon on this passage by saying - we might not always walk on water, but we can always say 'save me'.

Jesus will catch us when we are out of our depth. Amen.