

## A Rescue Story

*Reflection Before a Time of Healing Prayer*

August 13, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Matthew 14: 22-33*

When I graduated from divinity school, one of my older professors began his baccalaureate speech to our class by describing to us a maritime practice, and according to him, a precision art called semaphore. He spoke of how when he was in the service he was trained to use large, hand-held signal flags. Similar to Morse code, the language was internationally recognized and was often used to communicate distress signals to distant shores, ships, or aircraft. He described it to us with his eyes closed, as if he was back on some far-away training field or beach, and there was one signal he was intent on sharing with us, just in case we'd ever need it. The sign for attention came first! Arms and flags waving high and across. Then, left hand low, right hand out. Left hand high, right hand out. Left hand low, right hand out. Over the years, this three-letter flag symbol has meant different things. "Sink or Swim." "Send Out Someone" and, most commonly: "Save Our Souls."

I realize that several of you have heard me tell this story before, but somehow never in connection to this passage from Matthew. Hopefully, you can see why I couldn't resist sharing it again!

Poor Jesus, just trying to get some time away, yet somehow the disciples flag him down with their distress signals. We know what happens next. Even one who has never set foot in a church would know the expression "walking on water"! Or passage may well be the most familiar of all of the so-called miracle stories about Jesus. And yet to focus exclusively on questions about whether or not Jesus actually walked on water, or even whether Peter actually sank or swam, may miss a deeper meaning, beneath the surface. For today and given the context of healing prayer that we are preparing for, I invite us to consider this more as a rescue story, than a miracle story! Peter says it best, "Lord, save me!" For him it is SMS: Save My Soul!

Our text, assigned for this Sunday by the lectionary, is a different entry point for our healing service, and indeed a more pointed one. It invites us to consider for a moment where do each of us need saving? That is, where do we need rescue? I wonder if these questions may be coming at you a little too fast, if they feel a little too doctrinal or too dramatic. Maybe it's more like this: where might you need a lifeline right now? Or check out the synonyms for *that* word by the way - where do you need... a rescue device, a buoyant ring, preservation from harm, a source of salvation, help in a crisis, aid, assistance, support, rescue, salvation, sustenance, a helping hand, a shot in the arm, a boost, relief, comfort, consolation, guidance, grace goodness consolation, kindness nourishment backing succor, ease, encouragement?

And now let me say this. Someone who has been just these things for me, and I know for many of you, is leaving us in two weeks. Tending to our sadness about Lexi's leaving may be reason enough to come forward seeking some comfort and consolation. She's been a rock for us all through Covid and so much more. Or maybe you have other things going on in your life now that leave you with that sinking feeling or for that matter a buoyant one that you may feel moved to share. If nothing else, the news of climate catastrophes, from recent floods in Vermont to the fiery devastation in Maui are drawing us ever closer to the at-once surreal and all-to-real life rescue stories that are shaping a new reality for us all.

Ask me? I think the disciples here offer us much of an example in this as Jesus does! For what does the scripture say: First, “they cried out in fear,” a terror born not only from the wind and weather but also because they were worried they had seen a ghost! Yet notice how there are no tough guys there. There’s no: “We’re good. We got this. We don’t need anything. We can ride this one out by ourselves.” Instead, they chose to be vulnerable, to be honest, to admit they were scared out of their wits and unsure of what of came next. And therein lies the opening for their rescue, and the true miracle of the story, which was their willingness if not necessity to locate their trust outside of themselves, outside of their boat, in one who at first seemed on distant shore, but then was right there by their side. What’s more, they listen to what he says: which is what he has said to them and us many times before: Take heart. Don’t be afraid. I’m with you!” They let him calm their fears and settle their systems, enough so that Peter himself can step off the boat and float for a time - who knows maybe even walk on water all the while held and carried in the strong arms of god’s all accepting grace. Talk about a miracle! Sure, the wind scares him again and starts to thrash again but we see the progression and pattern nonetheless. First, a crying out Save our Souls! And God in Christ being there, always there, to Settle our Systems.

And so, I ask us all again ... where are you feeling alone or afraid, in need of a life-line, a soul-line of courage or consolation, guidance or grace? Where do you need to hear anew in your hearts Jesus words: Take heart. Don’t be afraid! Come to me! I’ve got ya!

And now for our traditional invitation:

*Dear Friends, we know that this wonderful world is also a world of sorrow, and that each of us bears a burden that is sometimes too heavy to carry alone. Today we wish to offer you a time of blessing and consolation, a time to renew your faith in God’s promise of wholeness and well-being for all people, and indeed for all creation.*

*This is an opportunity to receive a gentle word, a touch of soothing oil and a reassuring hand— all signs of God’s gifts of peace and hope. Some of you may wish not to come forward during this time. As you remain seated, please enjoy the quiet and the music, and pray for the world, for others, and for yourselves. Whether you remain seated or come forward, whether you ask aloud or silently within your hearts, God knows your need, and God comes to us all with hope and healing and peace.*

After Lexi blesses the oil and our hands, we’ll have three stations, two in the front and one in the back - your choice. Would the deacons please come forward?

## HEALING HYMNS AND PRAYERS

### CONCLUDING PRAYER

If you are following in our summer bulletin, this prayer will take the place of the one that usually follows the announcements:

*L: God be with you.*

***C: And also with you.***

*L: Let us pray...(silence, intercessions and the Lord’s Prayer)*

Ever living, ever loving God... Let your healing balm continue to pour over those places we have named and those that are too deep for us to name. And let us keep singing God, and let us keep praying for your healing above and in the very midst of our earth's lamentations

Through the storms and tumult of our world, through war in Ukraine, violence in the Middle East, through every flood and wildfire, keep us singing God and keep us praying. By your grace, let us not be shaken and help us to find that inmost calm.

Through the strife of our lives, through illness and addiction, through job loss and divorce, through our every grief and pain, O God, come to us - be a lifeline to all in need. By your grace, surround us, enfold us and secure our hope for a new day.

We thank you God, being our calm amidst the storms and amidst our fears. We confess and surrender our self-reliance to a reliance on you to fulfill our deepest yearnings, for peace, freedom, for wholeness and for restoration. Give us the strength and faith we need, to keep relying, keep singing, and keep praying even now in the words that Jesus taught us...

