

Courtney Godwin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Courtney Godwin:

Welcome to morning prayers. Our speaker this morning is Anya Bernstein Bassett. All who are able, please stand for a responsive reading, Psalm 108, found in your black psalter.

Courtney Godwin:

My heart is firm, oh God. I will sing and chant a hymn with all my soul.

Congregation:

Awake, harp and lyre. I will awaken the dawn.

Courtney Godwin:

I will praise you among the peoples, oh Lord. Sing a hymn to you among the nations.

Congregation:

Your faithfulness is higher than the heavens; your steadfastness reaches to the sky.

Courtney Godwin:

Exalt yourself over the heavens, oh God. Let your glory be over all the earth.

Congregation:

That those you love may be rescued, deliver with your right hand and answer me.

Courtney Godwin:

Grant us your aide against the foe, for the help of man is worthless.

Congregation:

With God, we shall triumph. We will trample down our foes.

Choir:

(Singing)

Anya Bernstein Bassett:

Our scripture this morning is from Matthew 14, 25 to 32. Shortly before dawn, Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus said to them, "Take courage. It is I, don't be afraid." "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come.", He said. And Peter got out of the boat, walked

on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me." Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith.", He said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

Anya Bernstein Bassett:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Anya Bernstein Bassett:

I became better acquainted with this passage from Matthew in 2018, when, get out of the boat, was the theme for my home church's retreat. I still have a paper boat on my desk with the words, don't be afraid, written on the hull in my pastor's script. The retreat was held over a beautiful fall weekend. And I remember leaving it feeling energized and inspired.

Since 2018, I've been afraid a lot. I've been afraid of the virus, of political turmoil, of our planet literally burning up. I've been afraid of anger and distrust that I've seen in this country, and in my home community, and at Harvard. I've been afraid of the anger I feel too. I want the courage to channel that anger into good, into care and compassion for others. My new year's resolution was that 2022 would be my year of courage. But by last spring, after two and a half years of scrambling to adjust to COVID times, I was exhausted, and feeling anything but courageous.

A joyous commencement and summer rest has eased my spirit, and I'm feeling more courageous this fall. So as we start the year, first day of fall, I'm wondering what it means to step out of the boat at Harvard now. What does it mean to not be afraid? How can we gain the faith we need to face this moment? The passage from Matthew gives me some ideas. First, it reminds me that our humanness makes it hard to see God, especially when God appears in surprising and unusual ways. If you saw someone walking on water might you not think it is a ghost? Might it be harder if it's early in the morning, before the sun is fully up and the wind is against you?

Reading about Peter, reminds me to be gentle with myself and others, as especially in the dark, especially when winds seem to be against us, it is so hard to keep our faith. But through Jesus, God reaches out to help Peter. Jesus calls, "Take courage. It is I, don't be afraid." Jesus expresses faith in Peter, and that faith leads Peter to step out of the boat. How many of us have gained courage when we have been encouraged by others? People who told us how wonderful we are, who believed in us, who reminded us not to be afraid. Could God have been speaking through them?

It is hard to hear encouragement, when real winds swirl around us, and when the winds of doubt swirl in our minds. But encouragement can be transformative. I think of the moment when Peter realized, yes, it really is Jesus. The Jesus who loves me, despite my brokenness. "Come.", Jesus said. And Peter stepped out of the boat. But once Peter started to walk on water, his humanness overtook him, and he became afraid and began to sink. Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

How many of us have needed a hand like that, to catch us when we stumble? The act of reaching out is also an expression of faith. As it presumes, that we have not fallen too far, and that we can get up. To be fair, Jesus was annoyed that he had to catch Peter, but he did it anyway.

I wonder whether two other things gave Peter courage? The first is experience. In the passage immediately before this one, Matthew was told the story of the feeding of the 5,000. I wonder if the memory of what God has done in the past, somehow helped Peter to get out of the boat? Have your memories of goodness and mercy strengthened you when you felt doubt?

And I wonder if it mattered that Peter was with his fellows disciples on the boat? To be sure, this was a group of people from very different walks of life, different perspectives, who disagreed about a lot of things. They thought a lot. But somehow, this motley crew had come together to follow Jesus, and spread the word of God's love. I wonder if being surrounded by his community's strength in Peter, allowing him to see that Jesus was really there, allowing him to hear his encouragement, allowing him to be caught when he fell.

What can we draw from these lessons at Harvard today, where there is so much darkness in the world around us, where we are buffeted by winds of change, both good and bad, when we're scared? We can listen for voices of encouragement, forming relationships with those who will love us, and who will encourage us to step out of our boats. We can be sources of love and encouragement for others. We can form communities, especially with people who are different from us, who we may disagree with. And yet, who are fellow humans, all trying to get out of our boats. We can take time to stop and calm the winds of our minds. This year, I'm going to try to do that. And I invite you to join me. Come.

Please stand, as you are able, and join me in prayer.

God, we live in a dark and windy time. Please help us to hear your voice through the wind, to have faith in your faith in us, and to step out of our boats. Please catch us when we fall and help us to get up again, so that we can be sources of goodness and light in this broken world.

And now, will you say with me, the prayer that Jesus taught us. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Courtney Godwin:

Let us sing the hymn, Great Is Thy Faithfulness. Number 76, found your crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing).

Courtney Godwin:

This transcript was exported on Sep 22, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Oh Lord, as we leave this space, give us the courage to step out of the boat. Give us the faith to not be afraid, and give us the strength to reach out our hands. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.