

The *I AM* That *WILL BE*
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 14:22-23
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I've told you this before, but my grandfather, Bob Poerschke, used to always say, "Everyone has the potential to be Jesus." Not *like* Jesus. But Jesus. "Everyone has the potential to be Jesus."

It's not that Granddaddy devalued the divinity of Jesus, nor did he overestimate Jesus' humanity. Instead, I think Granddaddy had an overwhelming belief in our Creator's capacity to transform humanity; to unlock the divine spark in every person; to see creation's potential fully and wholly revealed. Being Jesus is difficult to be sure, but it's not an impossibility – not in light of the God who is our source.

I started my formal pursuit of theology a little later in life, so I never got to ask my grandfather how it was he came to spin his theological yarn, and weave it into his own faith journey. But I can't help but think that this week's and last week's lections must have had a major influence on his thinking.

Last week, God is revealed to Moses at the burning bush. And God also reveals the divine name or identity, YHWW: *I AM* or *I AM WHO I WILL BE*. Translation: The God of history is present right now, and revealed in the actions of her people RIGHT NOW, AND in the days to come. Who is God? God is a people empowered to claim her exodus.

In Jesus, we find another manifestation of *I AM* and of *WHAT WILL BE*. In the first fourteen chapters of Matthew's gospel, Jesus continues to reveal himself as the Son of God. And while Jesus may not split seas in two, or appear in fiery flame, he does feed the multitudes and calm the seas. And today, he even walks on them.

And if you aren't careful, you might think that Jesus' ability to waterski without skis is the main point of this story, just as you might believe that the splitting of the Red Sea is the focal point of the Exodus. And while these events are impressive, they shouldn't distract you from the larger meaning of God's purpose for humanity.

Don't get me wrong, I think it's awesome that Jesus can go night walking on the Sea of Galilee. But he's not the star of this story. Peter is.

The sea's rocking. And the winds are howling. And the boat's shaking. And Jesus says, "Hey, y'all, it's me, don't be afraid."

And Peter says, "Okay, Jesus, if it's really you, and if, like you say, we have the ability to do what you do, then bid me to walk out to you."

"Come on," says Jesus.

And out of the boat and onto the water Peter goes.

Let that sink in. Peter takes initiative. Peter is daring. These same disciples quaked with fear a few chapters back, begging and pleading a sleepy Jesus to calm the rough seas. And just a few verses before today's lection, these same disciples suggested that Jesus dismiss the Bible study a little early so five thousand hungry people could make a Bojangles run before dark. Jesus said, "Feed them." The disciples responded, "How? That's impossible."

But not tonight. For a single moment, Peter allowed himself to be swept into the reality of God's presence. And he didn't see a raging sea. And he didn't hear the winds howl. And he didn't notice his stomach dropping as he bobbed up and down on twelve-foot waves. He saw Jesus standing in the water, bidding him to come near, inviting him to discover the *I AM* that *WILL BE*.

Like his ancestors before him, Peter had to make the choice to move into his destiny. They stood on a peninsula, trapped on one side by the Egyptian army, and on the other by the waters of the Red Sea. And somehow, some way, the waters parted, and offered them space, and offered them a chance to secure their destiny. And they didn't stop to worry about gravity. Instead, they focused their eyes on a future that lay before them. And yes, they still had their doubts, and they would still wander for forty years. But they took that first step.

When Peter steps toward Jesus, he makes the first leap of faith; he begins the journey that will cement the Christian Church. And for a fleeting moment, he realizes that he too, has the potential to be Jesus.

And then he looks down. And he realizes that he's still stuck between two worlds: this world, the one that tells him only certain things are possible, and that humanity's capacity is limited, its potential reserved only for rulers and other privileged folks; and God's world, the one where gravity doesn't have the final say, and where the impossible is possible. And while he longs for God's world, he has not yet broken free of Caesar's, whose hand is still firmly tugging at his shirttails.

And sinking, Peter says to Jesus, "Save me!" And of course, Jesus offers a steady hand. And calm is restored.

And the pessimist will read this lection, and say that Jesus scolds Peter: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Well, I wasn't there, so I can't confirm the tone of Jesus' voice. But I think it was more like that of a parent teaching a child to walk, or swim, or ride a bike. "Did you think I would let you fall? I'm not gonna let you sink. I'm right here. Why do you doubt?"

And though the child may not walk, or swim, or ride a bike just yet, one day she'll glide, or float, or fly all by herself. And it'll be because she gathered little moments of courage. It'll be because for two weeks in a row, for thirty seconds at a time, she trusted that something or somebody would catch her if she fell. And in that act of faith, she'll no longer worry about what's possible or not, she'll imagine *WHAT WILL BE*. It seems a little faith can go a long way!

Out there on those waters, Peter took the first steps of discipleship. He just wasn't quite yet ready to take off his training wheels. But one day, he would. And you know what, a little faith goes a long way.

In several years, he'd help a crippled man in Jerusalem rise from his mat, and enter the temple walking and leaping and praising God. And that same Peter would raise Dorcas from the dead. And that same Peter would become the Rock. That same Peter had the potential to be Jesus. And he was!!!

Good friends, this morning, we sit in stormy seas as well. Quite literally. Harvey behind us and Irma in front of us. And other seas, too: The DACA dilemma, and earthquakes, and an escalating nuclear crisis, and climate change, and poverty and addiction and eviction and homelessness and global hunger; even the ghosts of the Confederacy. And this morning, we do not see Jesus walking on these stormy seas.

But if we look forward, we see another calming presence: a table that can still the rough seas of our hearts. I can't explain it. I have a hard time articulating it. Somehow, some way, when we share a common meal with one another, we channel the spirit that dwelled in that very first meal with Jesus and Peter and the other disciples. In this space, Christ reminds us, we too, have the potential to be Jesus.

When we step toward this table, we proclaim the same audacious hope as Peter: *I AM* stirs inside of each of us. And when *I AM* stirs inside of us: We have the power to feed five thousand people; We have the power to bring healing after hurricanes; We have the power to defy the gravity of racism and classism and sexism; We have the power to offer a balm that will one day sooth forever the stinging effects of addiction, and depression, and loneliness, and hopelessness. We have the power to make the impossible possible. We have the power to bring about the *I AM* that *WILL BE*.

Our first steps may be awkward and clumsy. And the ones after that may be, too. But we are steadied by the Christ, who offers a secure hand. When Peter started walking, he cried, "I am sinking." But along the way, Jesus said, "Don't worry, one day, "You will be walking." And one day, he did. And one day, so shall we. And we too, can be Jesus to a world that desperately needs Jesus.

May it be so! And may it be soon. Amen.