

A Sermon preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church  
2615 Sykes Road  
St. Helens, OR 97051  
By Rev Peter J. Blank  
Matthew 14:22-33  
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MESSAGE Unraveled by uncertainty: Peter sinks in the water

When COVID-19 shut down this nation and the world, I prayer walked my neighborhood. When I was unemployed and looking for a job, I walked and I prayed. This week I prayer walked for these reasons: Another school shooting has happened in Georgia with 4 lives taken; The ongoing war of Israel and Hamas, the war in Ukraine continue to spill innocent blood; This is Presidential election year and the outcome is uncertain. When I am uncertain which way to turn, I pray and I walk.

As I took prayer walks and tried to discern what to preach on during this unique fall of 2024, I came across A Sanctified Arts' "Unraveled" series. During this time of uncertainty, I have felt more than a bit unraveled. ***What does it mean to be unraveled; to be disheveled? What happens when we feel as though our world is falling apart?*** Unraveled can mean many things.

- To become undone.
- To break and become shaky at the core of our souls.
- To investigate something complicated or puzzling.

Friends, I can relate to the hard spiritual work of investigating and encountering some complicated and puzzling stories. As the creators of the series from A Sanctified Art say, "*These are stories where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling our plans—God meets us—creating us into something new.*" Because the good news is whatever becomes unraveled can, with help, become new and mended once again.

In Matthew's gospel, today's text takes place immediately following Christ and the disciples receiving the devastating news of John the Baptist's death. Christ's sadness and need to withdraw is met with a mourning crowd. A crowd hungry for love and nourishment. A crowd met with a miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and level of compassion from a grieving Messiah that is unprecedented. Yet, after the feeding of 5,000, even Jesus needs some time in prayer by himself, and goes off to do so. When the waves grew, battering the boat the disciples were on, Jesus re-enters.

I believe in every fiber of my being that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through scripture. You may have heard this story preached multiple times and I've preached this story many times myself. There have been times I've read this text and been too hard on Peter, myself, and others. I've read the story as, 'okay, let's work on our faith,' as if to say that maybe if Peter only had more faith, he would have made it to Christ. I've stopped with the focus on Peter or myself when I got out of the safety of the boat to be unraveled by the elements.

This time, reading the text, I thought, let's not be too hard on Peter. I ask myself if I were in Peter's sandals, would I have gotten out of the boat in the first place. I wonder if I would even step into the unknown as waves and wind battered the boat. Would you? This time, it was Peter's uncertainty in the text and more how Christ meets Peter in his uncertainty that leapt off the page at me. It is interesting how I read text through post-COVID-19 lens and how differently we all may read texts through a lens of the uncertainty, unrest and unraveling of 2024.

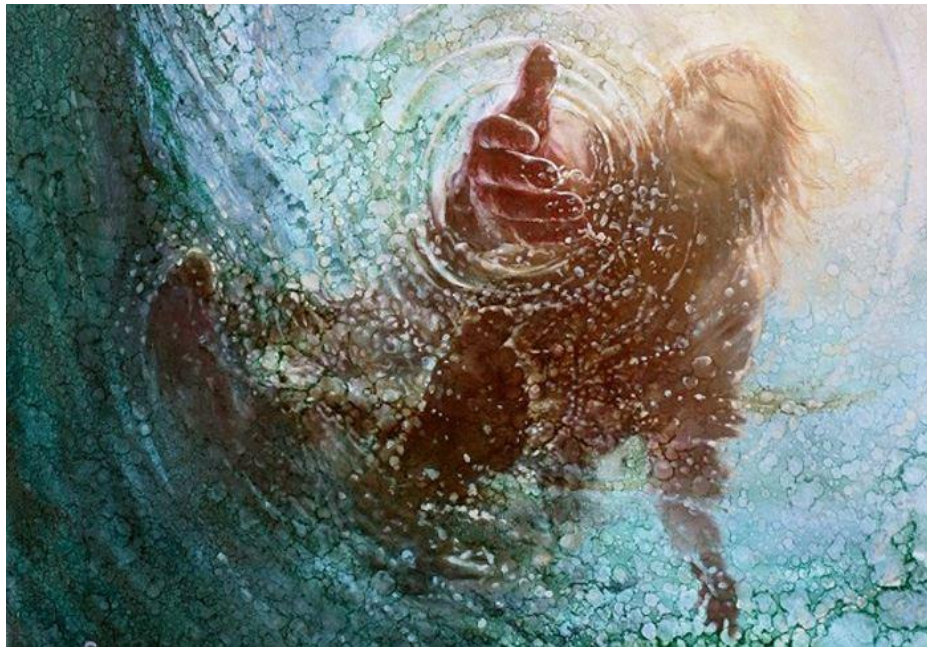
There are two questions I want to push us to ask today's text. ***The first is "How is God working in the midst of the unraveling?"***

Peter becomes unraveled by his uncertainty. Peter takes a step into the waves and begins to sink. His confidence unravels right there in the wind and waves. Fortunately for him and for us, Jesus is there, the boat is there, and his friends are there. When we are sinking in doubt and uncertainty, let us remember God's outstretched hand.

Sometimes, we need God to unravel us, to shake up our faith, to open our eyes and knit us back together and point us towards a new path.

But it is not just Peter who is unraveled by uncertainty in today's text. It is also the cautious ones in the boat watching Peter step out. The one who walked for a time on water, the same one who is afraid and sinks and calls for help, and the ones who saw it all and confessed that Jesus is the son of God. They are all actually equal in their relationship to God because...all of these and all of us have one thing in common: we are all those whom Jesus draws near saying, 'it is I, do not be afraid.'

As pastor and author, Nadia Bolz-Weber observes, "The glamorous part of this story is that Peter walked on water. Which let's all admit, that is pretty cool. And maybe Peter almost had enough faith to make his way to Jesus. But what happens on either side of his short little water walk? ***Jesus comes toward HIM.*** In the storm Jesus is walking toward the boat, when Peter sinks, Jesus is reaching toward Peter. Christ is there to be with Peter through his uncertain walk and sinking. But Jesus doesn't stop there, He also gets in the boat with them...that's about as with them as he can be. Yet we seem to always focus on Peter walking toward Jesus **when the whole story is about how much Jesus walks toward them and us...how Christ reaches toward them and then even gets in the boat with them.**"



So what does this text say to us this morning, in the midst of all the unraveling in our world?

This leads us to ***the second question: What can we learn from this story of unraveling?*** I have a confession. I don't do well with too much uncertainty. If I'm being overly generous, I'd give

myself a D when it comes to dealing with uncertainty. Whether I'm uncertain about something small like who may pick me up from the airport in Denver, when I flew there to do a wedding. Or something bigger, like where I should go to school or move, I'm not always great at it.

I have a sense, I'm not alone in this, especially now...as so many uncertainties glaringly make themselves known and are in our face day after day. Whether it is not knowing what may be safe for us or unsafe. Or like being uncertain how to pray at times over these last couple weeks. When our prayers are more "ugh" and sighs than comprehensible words. (But that's another sermon for another day.) Yet, I have had enough uncertainty in my life to know that NOTHING is certain. These storms of uncertainty can churn our faith up as easily as hurricanes churn up tormenting waves that thrash boats around on the sea. Uncertainty is hard, even when Christ meets us there.

As Peter is unraveled with uncertainty, Christ meets him there, just as Christ meets us in uncertain times today. Once Peter is back in the boat, Peter and the other disciples' fear and uncertainty unravels into worshipful praise. As theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, "Peter walks, becomes frightened by the wind, begins to sink, and cries out to Jesus, as is rescued. This familiar sequence of actions need to be understood in light of the obedient act that put Peter on the water in the first place. It is not a story of the skeptic who habitually doubts, but the story of a faithful follower who becomes overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding him, who begins to lose his nerve when he discovers the odds stacked against him, but who from Jesus finds a steady, delivering hand." Church, can you relate?

Friends, think about the following question today and to share your thoughts with those in your household or a friend. ***Can you think of a time Christ recently walked toward you with an outstretched hand during these days of uncertainty?*** You know, for me, I feel Christ's outstretched hand when I see members of our congregation responding to recent events with love and compassion. I see it in the way folks come together to take care of each other and to take care of neighbors, even though small actions of offering a cup of water.

One thing, I've gleaned from Peter's uncertainty this week is that Christ is with us whether we can fully sense his presence or not. Christ reaches for us during our uncertainties. Friends, Christ is with us. Now. And always. Let us work to heed his words, "Courage! It is me. Don't be afraid!" and reach up as his hand stretches down to us.