I am part of the generation of people
whose lives were forever scarred
by watching JAWS in my early teens.
It changed my relationship with water completely.
That film made me nervous to swim in a swimming pool.
Never mind that it would be one very clever shark
to find its way into the swimming pool at
9 Pohutukawa Avenue, Cockle Bay.
Never mind that if I were to watch it again now
I would find the animatronic shark clumsy, unbelievable,
and most likely laughable.

And yet…

It has been only in the last five years or so
I have felt happy to travel on a ferry.
Yachts remain in the not-yet-maybe-never category.

And you won’t catch me swimming in the sea.
But then – on the upside – neither will a shark.

Logic has no place here. Such is the power of fear.

So a reading like this morning’s gospel
sets my teeth on edge somewhat.

A small boat. A storm.
There are so many horrible ways this could end.

This story comes immediately after the Feeding of the 5,000.

You may recall that just prior to that
Jesus had heard news of the death of John the Baptist,
and had taken himself off, only to have the crowd follow.

The disciples had participated in the miraculous feeding.

And once again, Jesus seeks some time to himself.

So he sends them off in the boat, while he himself goes to pray.

This is a little detail we can easily miss
because it is overwhelmed by what follows.
Time and again, Jesus resources his own relationship with God.
In order to be present to attend to the people and needs before him,
Jesus anchors himself in prayer.

But as so often happened for him, and as often happens for us,
the best laid plans for quiet and solitude were overrun by events.

The weather turns. And quickly.

And the disciples – despite most of them being fishermen –
are doing it tough.

In the ancient world, the sea was understood
to be the place of death and spirits.

And so when Jesus turns up, casual as you like,
strolling atop the waves, the disciples freak out,
assuming him to be a ghost.

Never mind that they had very recently witnessed
Jesus doing miraculous things.
They did not recognise him. They were blinded by fear.

This would also come to be the case much later,
after his resurrection they would not recognise him,
because again they were blinded by fear.

Jesus reveals himself to them, saying,
“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

There’s a lovely resonance with the Old Testament passage.

Amid the noise and power of a storm on the sea,
it is a gentle, reassuring voice that announces the Son of God.

As per usual, Peter wants in on the action.

And it all starts so well.

You will have heard sermons in the past about Peter beginning to sink because he took his eyes off Jesus.

But David Lose offers this perspective, “Peter doesn’t just flounder because he takes his eyes off Jesus, but because he grows afraid.
And, quite frankly, that fear is justified.

It’s a storm, for heaven’s sake,
raging powerfully enough to sink the boat,
let alone drown a single person.

[And that’s without factoring in the presence of man-eating sharks.] Peter has … perfectly good reason to be afraid.”

We, too have perfectly good reason to be afraid.
This year, perhaps more so than any other in recent years,
has brought collective fear to the forefront of our consciousness.

The world in Pandemic has changed and we are changed by it.

It is hard to know what life will look like
when we are on the other side of COVID-19.

And in our own lives, so too, there are things to fear.
“Whether it’s a fear of the return of illness, [of uncertainty of income,]
of the stability of a fragile relationship, of loneliness after loss,
of not being accepted …, of what the next chapter might hold,
of the direction of our society….

There are many things that cause us to fear.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote,

“The wise man in the storm prays to God,
not for safety from danger, but for *deliverance from fear.*It is the storm *within* which endangers him, not the storm without.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Fear is powerful. It is debilitating.

“It sneaks up on us, paralyzes us,
and makes it difficult to move forward at all,
let alone with confidence.
Fear, in short, is one of the primary things
that robs the children of God of the abundant life God intends for us.”

It robs us of our identity as children of God.

So with that in mind, let’s look carefully
at what happens at the end of this passage.

Peter notices the strong wind, becomes frightened,
and beginning to sink, cries out, “Lord, save me!”

Peter articulates the most fundamental and important prayer.

Help! Lord, save me.
Sometimes amid the fear that swirls around us
that is as eloquent we are capable of being.

We know our need, and we know that it is not our own strength
that can carry us.

Notice that Jesus does not tell Peter to get better at floating.

Jesus doesn’t urge Peter to be brave, or to focus on him.

Jesus acts.

“When Peter begins to sink, Jesus reaches out and grabs him,
saving him from drowning and restoring him to his vocation as disciple. And so also with us! Jesus will not let us go. Jesus is with us.
Jesus will not give up on us.
Jesus will grab hold of us when we falter
and restore us to where we can be of service.”

For this reason David Lose interprets Jesus’ words to the disciples towards the end of the passage
**not** as a rebuke, but as a lament.

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

This the promise at the heart of this story is
that God will never give up, that God is with us and for us,
that God, in the end, will do what we cannot.

Fear is an important signal. It tells us when we are in danger.

And it can become a way of being,
a paralysis that shuts down our ability to trust.

And when we find ourselves in that space,
there is but one prayer to utter: Help! Lord, save me.

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson [↑](#footnote-ref-1)