



Take Heart
Rev Grace Behm

Year A, 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 | Matthew 14:22-33
9 August 2026

It doesn't take much to convince us that we're living in stormy times.

The news arrives before we've even got out of bed: another war, another flood, another economic forecast, another political crisis, another scandal, another poll, each one arriving with its own small claim on our attention and its own reason to worry.

And it isn't only the events themselves that unsettle us. It's the way our whole world has been built to keep us unsettled. Every headline is competing for our attention, every notification is asking us to look over here instead of there, and every social media feed has learned, with a kind of ruthless efficiency, that outrage holds our gaze far longer than hope ever will. Fear is profitable. Anxiety is engaging. The wind, it seems, never really stops blowing.

Perhaps that's why this gospel feels so familiar to us. The disciples are exactly where so many of us find ourselves most days: in a boat being battered by waves, exhausted, frightened, wondering how much longer the night can possibly go on.

And then, in the middle of all that darkness, something appears.

They don't recognise Jesus. Instead, Matthew tells us, they think he's a ghost, and there's something worth sitting with in that. Fear has a way of distorting our vision. When we are frightened enough, for long enough, we begin to

mistake one thing for another. We grow suspicious. We assume the worst of people and situations. We start to see enemies where there are neighbours, threats where there are possibilities, ghosts where there is Christ.

Jesus' first words to them are not instructions. They are reassurance.

“Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.”

And the Greek is even more striking than the English lets on. Jesus says, *Ego eimi*, “I AM.” It's the very name God gave to Moses from the burning bush. So before Jesus does anything else, before he calms a single wave, he simply reminds them who it is that is with them in the boat.

Then comes Peter.

Poor Peter has had a bad reputation for centuries. We remember him mostly for sinking. We remember Jesus asking him, not altogether gently, “Why did you doubt?” But I've always had a soft spot for Peter, because he's the only one who actually gets out of the boat. The others stay where it feels safe, gripping the sides, watching. Peter steps out into the uncertainty, into the wind and the dark water, simply because he wants to be where Jesus is. And for one impossible moment, he walks.

Then Matthew tells us something extraordinarily simple: “He noticed the strong wind.”

Not, the wind became stronger. Not, the storm suddenly worsened. The wind had been there the whole time. Peter just hadn't been paying attention to it. What changed wasn't the storm. What changed was Peter's attention.

That feels like a modern observation to make of a very old story. Our lives, are shaped by what captures our attention, and the media knows this, politics knows this, and social media certainly knows this, perhaps better than any of us do. If you can keep people anxious, they'll keep scrolling. If you can keep people afraid, they'll keep watching. If you can convince them that

the next crisis is the only thing that truly matters, you will never, ever lose their attention.

And to be clear, this isn't a sermon about switching off your phone. The storms are real. Climate change is real. The cost of living is real. War is real. Housing insecurity is real. The debates we're having here in Aotearoa about Te Tiriti, about public services, about inequality, migration, and our common future: these are not distractions from real life. They matter, deeply, because they shape people's lives, especially the lives of those who are already vulnerable, already stretched thin, already bearing the weight of a world in motion.

The Christian response to all of this is not to pretend it doesn't exist. The wind is real. Peter doesn't imagine it. Jesus doesn't deny it either. But there is a difference, and it's a difference worth holding onto, between paying attention to the storm and allowing the storm to determine who we become.

That difference matters more than we usually admit. Because fear changes us. Fear narrows our imagination until we can no longer picture anything beyond the next threat. Fear encourages us to sort the world into people who belong and people who don't, into us and them, into safe and dangerous. Fear whispers that scarcity is inevitable, that compassion is a weakness we can no longer afford, that our neighbours are really competitors for what little remains. And fear is extraordinarily useful in politics, because frightened people long for certainty, and certainty is a very easy thing to sell.

But the Church has never been called to manufacture certainty. We've been called to cultivate hope. And hope, I want to be clear, is not optimism. Hope doesn't deny the storm, or pretend the waves are smaller than they are. Hope simply insists that the storm is not the deepest truth about reality. The deepest truth, the truest thing in the boat, is the presence of Christ within it.

Which is why I think the most important question in this gospel is not, "Why did Peter doubt?" That's the question we usually reach for, because it lets us

stand at a safe distance and judge him. The more searching question, the one that actually implicates us, is:

Who is shaping our attention? What, exactly, is discipling us?

Because if we spend our days immersed in voices that trade in outrage, fear and contempt, we shouldn't be surprised when those become the habits of our own hearts. And if our attention is constantly fragmented, constantly captured, constantly redirected toward whatever the next emergency happens to be, we slowly lose the capacity to notice grace even when it's standing right in front of us, hand outstretched.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons Christians keep gathering, week after week, around a table. Think, for a moment, about what we actually do here. For one hour, we stop. We turn off, or at least we quiet, the endless demands on our attention. We listen to ancient stories instead of the endless scroll of commentary. We pray for the whole world, not just for those who happen to agree with us. We confess, honestly, that we ourselves contribute to the world's brokenness, that we are not simply innocent bystanders to it. And we receive bread and wine with empty, open hands.

The Eucharist is not an escape from the world. It is, instead, the reformation of our attention. Week by week, it reminds us what is ultimately true: not that the storms have disappeared, not that politics no longer matters, not that justice can wait for a more convenient season. But that beneath all the noise, beneath every headline and every campaign and every market fluctuation and every fresh crisis, Christ is still saying, quietly and steadily,

“Take heart.

I am.

Do not be afraid.”

Amen.