



# ADULT STUDY

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## PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 2

# Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

*Disciples Learn to Have Faith*

## Introduction

The last session considered the disciples as risk takers, as people who boldly changed their entire life to follow Jesus. This session is about disciples as faith builders who were sometimes afraid and did not trust Jesus. Even though the disciples were devoted to Jesus, he had to remind them over and over again to have faith.

The stories of Jesus stilling the storm (Matt. 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25) and walking on the water (Matt. 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–52; John 6:16–21) are well-known examples of Jesus teaching the disciples to have faith, especially when they were up against their most primal fears. Modern readers sometimes have difficulty with these stories because we have been conditioned to be skeptical of miracles. However, if we hear these stories the way the earliest Christians might have heard them, we can better understand the powerful claim of these miracles and what they say about Jesus as the Son of God. As the events in these stories were meant to strengthen the original disciples' faith, so can they strengthen ours.

We need to first look at what “the sea” represented in the minds of the first hearers of these stories in order to understand the implications in Jesus' ability to calm the sea and walk across it.

## The Sea as Cosmic Chaos

In the ancient Near East, the sea was a symbol of primordial chaos. The murky depths, raging waves, and uncontrollable forces of wind and storm suggested a great and fearful power. People believed that the world was like a flat dish with a bowl over the top, completely surrounded by water. The earth was the flat dish, and the sky was like a bowl that held the waters away from the earth. Holes in the bowl allowed rain to come down. Thus, they imagined that the waters surrounded them.

Like the Genesis 1 story of creation, the Babylonian creation story *Enuma elish* (named for the first line, “When above . . .”) begins with a formless world and water. In the Babylonian story, the gods emerged and took shape out of the water. These gods were a fractious lot. The ocean goddess, named Tiamat, planned to get rid of Marduk and other gods who were annoying her. But Marduk defeated Tiamat in an epic battle and then split and formed her body into the earth and sky.

The ancient Israelites' shared a concept of the world as a domed sky holding back the waters and were familiar with Babylonian *Enuma elish* (or variations of it) from their time in exile and captivity in Babylonia. So when they began writing down the stories of Genesis (during and after the exile), the Israelites told the story from their unique point of view. There were not

multiple, warring gods, and there was not a great battle that violently separated the waters. In the ancient Israelite story, there is one God who brings order out of chaos. God's word brings life from land, sea, and sky. And God pronounced this life and order "good."

### The Sea Was No More

The image of the sea occurs again in the book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, *and the sea was no more*" (Rev. 21:1, emphasis added). Part of God's recreation of a new heaven and earth includes the assurance that chaos will be no more.

In Genesis 1, the creation story begins, like the *Enuma elish*, with a formless earth and dark chaotic waters. But in Genesis, God was already present: "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (1:2). God did not create through violence. God spoke. Light appeared in the darkness. God spoke again, and the waters parted to form dry land. God's presence hovering over the face of the deep brought order out of chaos so that life could begin. Later, this God would reveal to Moses a name by which to be known: YHWH, which means simply, "I AM." Unlike the gods of Israel's neighbors, YHWH's name did not come from the powers of nature but from a profound existential statement of ultimate being.

Another ancient story about God's power over the sea takes place in Genesis 6–9 with the narrative of Noah and the flood. God allows the dome holding back the waters to open, and the waters cover the earth again, a return to the watery chaos before creation. The only survivors are on the ark that God commanded Noah to build. The tiny ark is an oasis of life in the midst of dark, deep water, and God eventually brings it safely to dry land. This story also parallels ancient Near East flood stories, like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but Genesis reveals that God did not flood the earth out of capriciousness, like the other gods. An early Christian tradition compares the church to the ark, a boat floating to safety in the sea.

These stories are not saying that the sea is evil. The Psalms extol the sea as it lifts its voice in praise (Ps. 93:3) and the floods as they "clap their hands" (Ps. 98:8).

Psalms 148:7 says that the "sea monsters" and "all deeps" praise God. The sea was a source of bountiful food and water. However, imagery of deep, chaotic water was also a symbol of chaos, a force that only God can tame.

## The Storm at Sea

The Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Kinneret) is a large freshwater lake fed by the Jordan River and surrounded by steep hills on all sides. Still today, when cool air descends from the hills into the valley and mixes with warm air coming up from the lake, violent storms can arise quite suddenly. When the winds come from the Golan Heights in the east, the storms are so violent that the waves can be many feet tall.

Because some of the disciples were fishermen (including Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John), they had grown up by the sea and were quite adept at handling boats and rowing long distances. No doubt they were experts at reading weather patterns and had encountered sudden storms and rough waters many times. They knew how dangerous such conditions were and how quickly even the sturdiest fishing boat could be swamped and sunk. They probably knew fishermen whose boats had been capsized and lost during such storms.

### First-Century Galilee Boat

Archaeologists have been studying a first-century fishing boat that sank two thousand years ago in the Sea of Galilee and was preserved by anaerobic mud at the bottom of the lake. The ancient boat reveals the ingenuity of the fishermen, who patched it together many times with whatever parts they could find. See a photo and read more at <http://www.bibleodysey.org/en/people/related-articles/first-century-galilee-boat.aspx>.

The story of Jesus calming the storm at sea is powerful on more than one level of interpretation. The story occurs three times in the New Testament (Matt. 8:23–27, Mark 4:35–41; and Luke 8:22–25) with only slight variation. The disciples were rowing across the lake, with Jesus asleep in the boat, when there was a sudden gale, the boat was filling with water, and "they were in danger" (Luke 8:23). The boat was being "swamped by the

waves" (Matt. 8:24), and the waves were beating into the boat (Mark 4:37), and yet Jesus remained asleep.

On a literal level, it is remarkable that Jesus could have remained asleep when a storm howled around them and waves were crashing into the boat and filling it with water. The shouts of the disciples and creak of the oars as they battled the waves, the sting of the pelting rain, the slap of the cold water rushing over the sides of the boat, and the violent pitching of the small craft should have wakened him. Some commentators say that Jesus must have been so exhausted from teaching and healing that he was able to sleep through it, and others suggest that he slept because he knew he had nothing to fear from the storm, and this was the beginning of the disciples' lesson in faith.

The panicked disciples woke Jesus and asked, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38). Jesus "woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'" (4:39–40). The disciples were amazed, but they still did not quite understand: "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" (4:41).

Most readers probably identify with the frightened disciples. They were in great danger, afraid for their lives, and Jesus was not responding to their plight. He was completely out of it—asleep. This is the way panic feels: the situation is dire, there is nothing we can do, and our prayers seem to go unheard. Jesus, don't you care that we are perishing? Why don't you pay attention and get us out of this?

But Jesus is not as concerned about the storm as he is about the disciples' lack of faith. In Matthew's version, Jesus rebukes the disciples first, not the storm: "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" (Matt. 8:26). Then he rebukes the wind and sea and produces a dead calm. The disciples see this miracle but still do not have the kind of faith Jesus expects: "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?" (Matt. 8:27). Does Jesus really expect them to believe that he can calm the wind and sea with a word? Does Jesus really expect this kind of faith in us?

The primordial story of God bringing order out of chaos in Genesis 1 underlies this miracle story. If God can divide the darkness and light, the sea and land, and

create life with only a word, then God's Son can calm the wind and sea with only a word. We of little faith still find this to be unbelievable, and yet many Christians attest that prayer does have the power to calm inner storms of fear and doubt. When a person looks back on a life-changing experience, he or she often can see how Jesus was there the whole time, even if it seemed like he was asleep. Even in the midst of disaster, even when people die, Jesus is there, reminding us to have faith. Many Christians find comfort in imagining "Christ asleep within my boat, whipped by wind and still afloat."<sup>1</sup> The imagery of the church as a boat at sea with Christ inside is also a powerful reminder that disciples of Jesus must have faith that God continues to work to bring order out of chaos.

## Walking on Water

The story of Jesus walking on the water is a stumbling block for many Christians who not only disbelieve that such a feat is possible but wonder why this demonstration of superhuman power was necessary. Was Jesus just showing off?

Again, Genesis 1 is the starting point for interpreting this story. Just as the spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep, Jesus came walking toward the disciples on the water. Jesus, like God, hovered over the face of the deep. When the disciples saw him, they thought he was a ghost and cried out in terror. But Jesus told them not to be afraid, for "it is I." In the Greek text, Jesus says *ego eimi*, which means "it is I," but it also means "I AM." In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, when God tells Moses his name, the Hebrew YHWH is translated into Greek as *ego eimi*, "I AM." Among the earliest Christians were Jews that used the Septuagint as their Bible, and they immediately would have heard the name of God in Jesus' words, "I AM."

Just as in the story of Jesus calming the storm, this story tests the faith of the disciples, who must recognize Jesus for who he really is and not by their expectations. In the Gospel of Mark, when the disciples see Jesus walking on the water, "he intended to pass them by" (6:48). They were afraid, but Jesus called to them, got in the boat, and the wind was stilled. Interpreters have wondered why Mark includes the information that Jesus was intending to pass them by. Jesus saw them straining at the oars, against the wind, but he was going to walk right by them. Perhaps if we read this

story in the context of the story of Jesus asleep in the boat, we can see what was happening. Jesus expected the disciples to have faith, and his presence should not have been necessary. They could do this task without him, as they would have to do when he was no longer with them. But when they asked him, he readily got in the boat, and the winds were calm.

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## Jesus expected the disciples to have faith sufficient for their need, and yet he was quick to help them when they faltered.

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There is also the curious context of the story: Jesus had sent the disciples on ahead, while he went up into the hills alone to pray. Sometime later, when he had finished praying, he set out to join them by walking across the sea. While he was on earth, Jesus was not always physically with the disciples. He occasionally sent them off to get food (e.g., John 4:7), or he separated from them so that he could pray. Perhaps the early church recounted Jesus' solitary prayer, the disciples' boat trip, and Jesus' intent to pass them by as a lesson in striking out in faith. The disciples did not need to fear heading out, because they knew that Jesus was not far away. They needed to develop sufficient faith so that Jesus did not need to coach them. Whether he was asleep in the boat or walking toward the boat, Jesus expected the disciples to have faith sufficient for their need, and yet he was quick to help them when they faltered.

The Gospel of Matthew includes another dramatic test of this faith, initiated by Peter. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, Peter said "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." (14:28–29). There is an aspect of "truth or dare" to this story. Peter got out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus, but when he saw the wind, he was afraid and began to sink. He cried out "Lord, save me!" (14:30) and Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (14:31).

Peter was successful as long as he was looking at Jesus and trusting that it really was Jesus. Underlying that identity, Jesus was "I AM." But as soon as he noticed the wind and was distracted from looking only at Jesus, he began to sink. Peter's short walk on the water is analogous to a short period of true faith that Jesus has the power to bring order out of chaos. But Peter was distracted by the chaos and nearly became drowned in it. Jesus saved him and asked, "Why did you doubt?" Whether Jesus said this in an exasperated, reprimanding way or as a means of helping Peter begin to articulate what led him to doubt, the ending of the story resolves with both Jesus and Peter safely in the boat and as the wind calms down.

The graphic imagery of Peter seeing the wind, beginning to sink, and crying out for help, followed by Jesus immediately stretching out his hand to catch him, is a powerful example of prayer. Many Christians have prayed this story in times of trouble and despair, when their own attempts are too small, the wind too strong, the waves too high, and their fear too great. And Jesus is right there—why do we doubt?

## Conclusion

The disciples were called to have great faith. As apostles, they would go out into the world to heal, teach, perform their own miracles, and, most importantly, tell the story of the power of Jesus to a chaotic world. Even though Jesus was no longer physically with them, they believed that he was with them in spirit, giving them strength. Those of us who would be disciples of Jesus must also ask for faith and practice being faithful by examining our doubt and believing in the power and goodness of "I AM."

## Note

1. Miriam Therese Winter, "Joy Is Like the Rain," ©1965 by Medical Mission Sisters, Philadelphia: Vanguard Music Corp, [http://www.hymnary.org/text/i\\_saw\\_raindrops\\_on\\_my\\_window](http://www.hymnary.org/text/i_saw_raindrops_on_my_window).

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