



**THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
AUGUST 9, 2020  
MATTHEW 14: 22-33  
THE JOURNEY OF THE HERO/HEROINE**

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."



## SERMON

Did you ever consider that you are meant to be a hero or heroine?

Well, you are.

Otto Rank, a contemporary of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, wrote a little book titled the myth of the birth of the hero.

Each one of us has undergone this incredible transformation from a little water creature, living in the world of our mother's amniotic fluid, then emerging as an air-breathing mammal where we eventually stand on our own two feet and take on our own life. This enormous transformation is a heroic act and, in giving birth, it's a heroic act on our mother's part.

Now the ancient stories told about the hero or heroine focus on the trials and tests which must be undergone if we are to have a life of meaningful experience.

All the tests, trials, and tribulations are necessary if we are to find our career or find our path. Necessary if we are to discover why we are here on earth. Necessary if we are to reveal our character or realize our true nature.

Sometimes we choose these trials. Often, in choosing our career, it involves overcoming a series of challenges.

In order to become trained as a pastoral psychotherapist, I had to either drive or take a train to from Bloomington, Illinois to Chicago twice a week for four years. Sleep on a friend's sofa every Tuesday night. Take the El into Chicago and travel through Cabrini Green, the worst neighborhood in Chicago, learning to avoid eye contact or bumping into the wrong person in order to stay safe.

All while in a new marriage with deb (and we've just celebrated 27 years together) and starting a private practice.



Other trials and tests choose us. Someone is drafted into the army. You didn't intend for this to happen, but it did. You must undergo physical challenges, be torn down mentally and remade. You are given a uniform as a sign that you have become a different character.

So many of our myths, legends, and fairy tales are about the hard work of heroic transformation. The stories are about fighting the dragon, surviving the long journey, battling the demons. Today, we use different language:

Can we survive the wicked stepmother?

Can we go underground for a significant period of time, as in therapy, and come up again having transformed our pain?

Can we suffer painful loss—the death of a parent. The death of a child. A divorce. The loss of a career. And not be broken by this suffering.

Can we find ourselves lost in addiction and find our way out of that hell into a new sober or straight life?

And now we all are faced with the challenge of the pandemic. How can we make it through what is beginning to look like an experience with no end in sight?

It is helpful to remind ourselves of the hero or heroine's journey, because the old stories can give us hope, place our life into a larger context, and show us the spiritual dimensions of our life's path.

All the old stories deal with the transformation of consciousness. The transformation is our hearts and minds. That we are thinking in this way and now we have to think in a new way.

Framing our life's journey in these ancient stories help us see our life as a true adventure, full of metaphoric dragons, attacks by evil forces, challenges by the gods, and death-defying battles.



It is easy to opt out of the heroic transformation. We can just follow the general outline of the collective pattern: go to school, find a job, get married, buy a house, have some children, grumble about the boss, drink beer and watch the Steelers, and then retire and wait to die.

State Farm Insurance has its corporate headquarters in Bloomington, Illinois where Deb and I lived for twenty-seven years.

And people who worked for State Farm spoke of the golden handcuffs. Many hated their work, the State Farm routine, the State Farm way, but the salary was so good and the benefits so attractive that few felt they could ever leave. They were chained by the golden handcuffs. Even though, as a therapist colleague stated, “all my State Farm clients are depressed.”

The story of the hero or heroine refers to someone who leaves the well-worn path in order to follow their bliss, as Joseph Campbell puts it.

As a side note, let me suggest that rather than worrying about the impact of the pandemic on our children, that we recover the language of the hero or heroine’s journey and that we teach our children that this is what life is about. Facing the great unknown and that Jesus has been there, done that, and has shown us the way. We are facing obstacles and challenges and we are making it through. Our children can heroically learn patience, endurance, learn how to adapt, how to keep at it when times get tough. Our children can use this experience to grow as children of God.

And then, for adults, the Christian story is about losing yourself and giving yourself to another—something bigger. This is a trial, in and of itself. Are we willing to set aside our little life in order to be part of the grand Christian narrative of living, dying to our life, and being reborn as a follower of someone and something greater? This is the soul’s high adventure.

And all of this soulful material about the hero and heroine is background for our story this morning.



In addition, if we want to understand the meaning of this story, we also need to focus on water for a moment.

In both spiritual and psychological literature, water is the great unknown. The habitat of monsters. The realm of storms and hurricanes. The fear of being overwhelmed by powerful waves. The fear of being pulled down by the brute force of demonic forces, that we now call depression, anxiety, malaise, failure, or some form of mental illness.

In baptism, we are immersed in water, literally and symbolically, as a way to declare that Christ accompanies us on the great sea journey.

The early church, connected to the power of water, called the baptismal font the fish pool.

Jesus calls fishermen as some of his disciples.

After the resurrection, Jesus appears and eats fish with his disciples.

The act of eating fish relates to integrating aspects of the great watery unknown.

That Jesus walks on water symbolically tells us that Jesus has found a constructive way to relate to the great unknown.

Jesus has found a way not to be overcome by the depths of the great unknown. Instead he was found a way to navigate the waters.

The face we turn to the great unknown is the face the great unknown turns to us.

Initially, the disciples cannot relate. They think a ghost has appeared out the great unknown and so they are in fear.

The perception of a ghost suggests that they are being drawn into the spiritual world.

Peter seems to momentarily get it. He asks Jesus to call him out onto the water.



And, as Peter remains relationally, emotionally, mindfully focused on Jesus, Peter finds he can relate positively to the great watery unknown.

And then Peter loses his focus. He loses his connection to Jesus. The wind gets up, he takes his eyes off Jesus, he is overcome by fear, and he begins to sink.

Let me see if I can provide a concrete example of what walking on water means experientially.

Let's take my experience of training in Chicago for four years. When I started this process, I was facing the great unknown in countless ways.

Can I handle the travel? Well, on the way back from my interview, I got off the train at the wrong station. I stood there, without a cell phone, wondering how I was ever going to get home. I can't quite remember how I did get home. Someone may have had to drive and get me. I felt like a failure and that, if I can't ever manage a train schedule, how am I going to manage four years traveling back and forth? Starting to sink!

I was faced with studying complicated psychological theory. I hadn't been to school for almost twenty years.

I had to work with my first client.

Overcome obstacles all along the way. Because I had never done anything like this before.

And, after years of self-reflection, I came to understand that I always start out enthusiastically with the great unknown—a new project, a new idea, a new ministry.

And, after I am more than halfway through, I start to sink.

I begin to doubt. I feel as though I don't have what it takes to finish. I think I am messing it up beyond repair.



In this, I am Peter. I can't do this. I want to quit. The storm is coming and I am going to be pulled under.

I know that each one of you has your own pattern. And, for your own development, you want to come to know your pattern. Some may never get off the boat. Some of you may lose heart early on. Some of you, like me, may start to falter after you're in up to your neck. Some may have trouble completing and so, even though the shore is in sight, you sink.

In all of this we do well to heed Jesus' guidance found in Luke, "no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

The only way out is through.

Ordinary men and women, like ourselves, must use our small victories and successes as signs that we are able to walk on water. We can be sustained in our walk by staying focused, remaining confident, trusting in the Christ who has shown us how to walk on the water.

"O ye of little faith," says Jesus to Peter.

You can do this! You can trust in yourself. You can trust in me.

No one travels the path of the hero or heroine without being humbled.

If you've not been humbled in life, you are not on the hero/heroine journey. You're faking it. I have never forgotten that feeling of standing beside those train tracks feeling utterly defeated.

I would argue that many of the people who refuse to wear a mask are not willing to be humbled by a virus that is bigger than all of us.

Putting on a mask is a statement that we are vulnerable. A statement that we are refusing to walk on water and be changed by the experience.



The hero's way, the heroine's way is to humbly conquer the obstacles along the way, thereby learning by experience that we can encounter the deep waters, encounter the storms and, by the grace and strength of God, make it to the other side.

What we receive by following the hero/heroine path is our own self. We find our life. We find why we are here. We tap into divine energy. We deepen into being able to trust in our life's journey.

If we fight the monsters of the deep, if we face the storms, we gain what the old stories call "the treasure hard to attain." We then have a genuine claim to self-confidence, for we have faced the dark waters and gained ourselves. We have acquired the right to believe that we will be able to overcome all future threats by what we have experienced and learned about Jesus and ourselves.

## **SERMON SONG**

Bridge Over Troubled Waters