

## Walking in Faith Amid the Storm

In Christopher Gehrz and Beth Allison Barr, eds., *Faith and History: A Devotional*. Waco: Baylor University Press

*“When Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’*

*(Matt. 14:30-33)*

It’s a story we know well: The disciples are in a boat on the Sea of Galilee being tossed about by a storm. Jesus walks out to them on the water, and once the disciples get over their shock and realize that Jesus isn’t a ghost, Peter decides to walk to him. Things go well until Peter notices his surroundings, becomes frightened (understandably so), and begins to sink until Jesus snatches him up.

I used to think the point of this story was to provide comfort during those occasional seasons when life is tumultuous; that after a few moments of Peter performing this party-game trick of walking on top of the water, he would either climb back into the safety of the boat or make it to Jesus and hop up on his back, grateful for surviving the exciting adventure.

The older I get, however, the more I wonder about that interpretation. I wonder if perhaps the “wind and the waves” state, not the boat, is the natural condition of the Christian life here on earth; that our purpose isn’t so much to get back in the boat or to reach Jesus’s hand, but simply to learn to trust that his presence will hold us up amid the uncertainty which is a constant part of life.

That seems to be the message of a famous hymn based on this text, “Be Still, My Soul.” The hymn was penned by an 18<sup>th</sup> century German pietist hymn writer by the name of Katharina von Schlegel. “Be still my soul,” von Schlegel wrote, “the waves and wind still know His voice, who ruled them while he dwelt below.” As you read the text of this memorable hymn, you get the idea that for von Schlegel, the resolution of the storm—the safety and security—don’t come until the end of life. “Be still, my soul,” she concludes. “When change and tears are past, all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.”

When I think of Christians who have demonstrated a deep sense of trust amid constant uncertainty, another German comes to mind: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor/theologian and anti-Nazi conspirator. Bonhoeffer grew up in a prominent Prussian family and could have enjoyed a life of security as a theology professor. His Christian convictions, however, led him to become a leader in the Confessing Church movement which opposed the capitulation of German Christianity to Nazi control.

In 1939, as conditions in Germany became increasingly dangerous for resisters, the perfect “boat” presented itself for Bonhoeffer—a faculty position at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he could

advocate on behalf of the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer left for the U.S. in June 1939, but he soon concluded that he was called to endure the ordeal of World War II back home with his fellow Germans. Two weeks later, he boarded a very different boat—the last steamer traveling to Western Europe. Bonhoeffer’s opposition to the Nazis during the war years, including involvement in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler, resulted in a life of constant danger and uncertainty until his execution in April 1945. His writings, however, express a trust in God’s sovereignty and ultimate victory, a faith that enabled him to walk amid the turbulent waves in his life.

A half-century later, another theologian, Henry Nouwen, followed Jesus’s call out of the boat when he left a tenured position at Yale to work at a home for mentally disabled adults. About Matthew 14, Nouwen wrote:

So much is going on in our lives: new directions, old fears, apprehensions, and great uncertainties. . . . There is so much going on beneath our feet that we are wondering if we can keep walking on all these waves. But Jesus is with us here and now. Problems are small and fears bearable when we know who calls us. . . . We will not succeed if we stay in the boat. We will not survive if we look down at the waves. But we do not have to look down and drown. Jesus calls us to look up and forward to the one who stands in the midst of the storm (*Discernment*, 129).

The notion of a safe, secure life is a myth. Fortunately, we have examples of Christians who have faced change and uncertainty with confidence, and we have a Savior who promises to uphold us amid the storms of life.

#### FURTHER STUDY

Among the many books that have been written about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a good readable introduction to his life is Michael Van Dyke’s *Radical Integrity: The Story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Henry Nouwen’s *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* recounts his journey from tenured professor to working with the disabled, and it is a wise reflection on what it means to follow Christ amid life’s changes.