

DATE: August 9th, 2026
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 14:22-33
THEME: Focus on the learning rather than the test.
SUBJECT: Perseverance, learning
TITLE: A Lesson in the Fourth Watch ("Crossing Over" series #1)

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What is an important lesson that you've learned?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

First of a three-week series: "Crossing Over". There'll be a lot of travelling around as Jesus crosses a lake, travels up north, and then moves eastward. This week, Jesus and the disciples cross over the northern part of the Sea of Galilee (Tiberius), a distance of a few miles. They do this overnight, so they're also crossing over from one day to another. Next week, we'll read about a Canaanite woman who meets Jesus at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea about 40-50 miles away. And on August 23rd, we'll follow Jesus and the disciples as they move inland about 30-40 miles to the base of the highest peak in the entire region: Mt Hermon. In addition to the physical distances they cover, there's also a spiritual "crossing over" that happens as they move from place to place.

As we move into the second half of summer with our Fall Start-up about a month away, we're crossing over too. What can we discover during this time?

Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night? And by "middle" I mean 3 am. Maybe you were worrying about an upcoming event. Maybe you couldn't wait to begin celebrating your 9th birthday. Maybe you were planning something: a trip, the new furniture arrangement in your living room, a project at work. You tried to go back to

sleep, but sleep just wouldn't come. After tossing and turning, you looked over to the clock: 4:29am! Knowing you've been awake for an hour and a half made you even more anxious. If that has ever happened to you, then you were "sleepless in Portland" in the fourth watch of the night: 3am to 6am.

The fourth watch is mentioned at several key points in scripture. The Israelites were finally released from slavery in Egypt and they had come to the edge of the sea in their escape. With Pharaoh's army in pursuit, God opened up the sea so the Israelites could walk through on dry ground while God held back their pursuers. But then, in the morning watch (the fourth watch of the night), God allowed Pharaoh to continue his chase. You can read what happened next in Exodus 14. Many centuries later, a Jewish rabbi — Jesus — rose to pray by himself "very early in the morning, while it was still dark" (Mark 1:35) and presumably very quiet. A few years later, three days after that same rabbi was put to death, two women — both named Mary — visited his tomb at dawn - the end of the fourth watch (Mt. 28:1). Rather than finding a battle-ready Roman guard in front of a sealed tomb, the women saw the guards, but they looked like dead men having died of fright; and they were "guarding" (if you can call it that) ... nothing ... but an empty tomb.

As they were growing up, my children would hear me tell them to be home by midnight because "nothing good happens after midnight." They held to the midnight deadline pretty well, though there were some nail biting exceptions. I remember when I stayed out into the wee hours of the morning once in high school. I started playing a board game at a friend's house at about 10pm, so I wasn't doing anything too risky. As it turns out, however, we were playing the game called "Risk" and, if any of you know the game, you know it can take a while. Well, this one went on for nearly six hours.

After playing for a while, I looked up at the clock: 1 am! I thought about calling my parents to let them know where I was, but I didn't. In my defense, the reason was because I didn't want to wake them up. (Ha!) So, I kept playing and, when the game was over I drove home. I walked in the front door at 4am and ... guess who was wide awake and there to greet me. Lesson learned: when in doubt, always call home. First the test, then the lesson. Usually it's the other way around.

As you know, I spent many years in education. Unfortunately for students, tests are just a fact of life, and most of the time the lessons do go before the test. I don't know too many people who like tests, although I had a few interesting kids who said they did, but on the whole tests are not popular among students. I never asked my students if they wanted to be tested. I simply expected them to take tests. Some did well and some didn't. Typically, a student who didn't do well could take a similar test if they wanted to. Those who got a C or D the first time would often ask, "If we do worse the second time, will you keep the highest grade?" (As if it's the grade that really matters. But I get it.)

The disciples had probably been with Jesus for a couple of years by the time they climbed into that boat to take what turned out to be something like a test - perhaps in the second watch of the night. They had heard a lot of lessons to that point. I read a commentary long ago which is lost to me now, but it suggested that — in Matthew's timeline — Jesus' baptism took place in the fall of the year 26 and that Jesus' appearance to his disciples on the water happened three years later — around the summer of 29. But that wasn't the first time they were tested. Perhaps a year earlier, Jesus had sent the disciples out with authority to "drive out unclean spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Mt. 10:1). It was sort of a test, but their success was

pretty much guaranteed. This business in the boat on a tormented sea in the fourth watch of the night was the first real test of what they had learned, the first recorded opportunity in Matthew that gives us a glimpse as to whether or not they were really understanding what Jesus had been teaching them over the years. Like so many teachers who slap down tests on the desks of their students on test day, Jesus didn't ask the disciples if they wanted to get into the boat. "Jesus insisted that the disciples got in" (Mt. 14:22). The Greek word for "insisted" (*anagkazō*) is often translated as "made", but I like the Inclusive Bible translation because I think it retains the original meaning. Jesus compelled and even forced the disciples to get into the boat. They may not have known that a test was coming — perhaps Jesus liked pop quizzes — but Matthew's gospel makes it clear that they didn't have a choice. They may have thought that they were simply sitting down to engage in a (required) task, but it turned out that they were about to play a game of Risk for the next several hours, culminating in the fourth watch. The task itself wasn't the important thing. Jesus wouldn't give them a grade, nor was anyone declared the winner. The important part of this test was to demonstrate (mostly to themselves) what they had learned.

I wonder what they did learn. Matthew may offer some clues about what Jesus hoped they would learn, what everyone reading this passage might learn. Perhaps the reader would identify with Peter in this story and learn to keep their eyes on Jesus, come what may. Perhaps they would take from this brief story the words of Jesus walking on the water during the dark night of the soul and hear his words, "It's me, don't be afraid." Maybe the reader would see themselves in the disciples after Jesus returned to the boat - after the wind died down - when they showed great reverence to God's Own. Whatever lesson they learned, it wasn't the test itself that mattered. The

test - during the fourth watch - came, but hopefully the disciples didn't focus on that. The lesson learned was everything.

In the aftermath of our house fire, we've relied on all kinds of help from friends, strangers, our insurance company. As we've moved to various temporary housing situations, had every cleanable object removed from our house, sorted through every other object and decided what to keep and what to throw away, worked with the remediation company to start the clean-up process, I'm not sure I've learned this lesson, but I'm trying to learn that "all will be well." I don't mean to sound like some high-minded spiritual guru. I'm not. I'm just bumbling along like the disciples, trying not to focus on the grade - on the test itself - but rather on the important lessons to be learned - because if I focus on the test then I'll live in the past and probably dwell on what I did wrong and maybe get caught in the swirling eddy of emotions that go with failure: anger, depression, fear. If I focus on the test - all the stress and storminess in the fourth watch of the night - then I might correct my mistakes if I'm ever in the very same situation again. But when does that ever happen? Better to focus on what I've learned, the broader lesson that I can apply to my life in the future and to focus on what I can do right.

What are the lessons that you've learned that have most shaped who you are, the lessons that continue to live in your body, that have changed how you move through the world? [pause] Was there a test involved, either before or after? Did the test happen in the middle of the day, when you could see well, when you were fully awake and perhaps felt in control? Or were these important lessons borne of hardship and difficulty as you made your way through the darkness, when you felt least awake in the metaphorical fourth watch? Did you feel ready for the test?

I suspect the majority of people would say that the most important life lessons came to them in the fourth watch, unbidden and unwelcome, and that - given the choice - they would have opted out of the test. I suppose we could get angry at our lack of options, at the One who forces us into the boat while storm clouds build on the horizon. Many have. I don't blame them. A God who puts us in harm's way on purpose in hopes that we'll gain some bigger life lesson isn't a loving God for some. Some come to the alternate conclusion that it's not God who creates tests; tests just happen and God is like a parent who chooses not to protect their children in every circumstance so that they will hopefully gain wisdom and understanding. Either way, it's tempting to focus on the test itself rather than what we can learn in the fourth watch of the night.

I confess that I'm still stuck in the fourth watch in certain areas of my life. I dwell too much on the struggle and the injustice of things that have happened in the past rather than demonstrating to God - but mostly to myself - what I have learned. Tests come and go; what we learn stays with us forever.

If the disciples learned to keep their eyes on Jesus or to not be afraid or to rely on Jesus to save them, they did not learn through book study. They did not learn through lectures, or parables, through watching miracles or through sermons. They learned because Jesus compelled them to get into a boat, sent them into a storm, let them struggle through the night, revealed himself as the I AM, and trusted that God's work in them would bring the fourth watch into the coming day, into life beyond sorrow and pain, and to know that in the midst of that pain, in the words of the 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich, "All will be well, all will be well, all manner of thing shall be well."