It’s a beautiful book and quirky. If you liked his bestselling breakout novel, *The Life of Pi*, you will love the magical journey that is Yann Martel’s *The High Mountains of Portugal*. The biggest surprise to me was stumbling upon a passage where a character launches into an interpretation of the miracles of Jesus.

Martel is a Spanish writer who lives in Canada and has studied philosophy, which is evident in his work. Though he has no credentials as a New Testament scholar, he pens a fascinating notion about how to interpret Jesus’ teaching. This Gospel story is central to his reading of everything. Here’s what he says: *The miracle of Jesus walking on the water is a guide to how we must read Scripture as a whole. The Gospels are lesser, their message weakened, if we read them as though they are reports by four journalists. But if we understand them as writing in a language of metaphor and symbols, then they open up with moral depth and truth.*

This is the second of three miracle stories we are looking at in successive weeks. Last Sunday, the feeding of the five thousand; next Sunday, the healing of a Canaanite woman’s daughter. Last week I talked about how miracles are signs of the new creation God is bringing into the world through Jesus. They are not one-off stories of how Jesus did things no one else could do that have no relation to our lives today except to show us that he is the Son of God and that, with Peter, we should confess him as such. Which we should.

Martel makes the point that this miracle of Jesus walking on the water is the only miracle that doesn’t benefit the human body. It doesn’t seem necessary, therefore. It wasn’t obviously used to help somebody who couldn’t be helped otherwise. As he says: *Walking on water did no one any particular good, raised no specific hopes. It was neither asked for, nor even needed. Why such an anomalous miracle in documents as spare*
and winnowed as the Gospels?¹

Martel sees it as the key miracle that unlocks all the others. Just as parables teach us through metaphor, this miracle is less about the literal walking on water than about the miracle of faith. It points to something spiritual that makes sense of everything.

So, what is this miracle of faith that connects us to everything else? Jesus’ walking on water reveals him as Lord of earth, wind and sea. He is sovereign over all life. The point is not to prove how one man can walk on water, but how all men and women can rise above everything and anything in this life that threatens us and causes us to be afraid. Take heart, Jesus says as he strides upon the surf. It is I. The words he literally says are these: Courage, I am, do not be afraid.

The phrase, I am, is a reference to when Moses asks the voice from the burning bush Who are you? I AM, God says. God is the great I AM. The ground of being that requires no direct object. God is being itself. God is the Lord of heaven and earth. Here Jesus identifies himself with the God against whom nothing and no one can succeed.

Right before Jesus walks on water, he has been praying by himself on the north shore overlooking the Sea of Galilee where the disciples are out in the boat. He draws upon God’s power and presence in his life. So much so that he has a lightness of being that allows him to rise above the elements.

Peter asks if he can come to him, and Jesus says, Come. Peter leaps out of the boat and begins to walk on water toward Jesus. And then, somewhere along the way, Matthew tells us, he noticed the strong wind and became frightened and began to sink.

This is always the situation with the church. Peter and the disciples in the boat represent us. We are always living between faith and fear. When we have our eyes on Jesus, we live in faith. When we have our eyes on the strong wind, we live in fear.

I wish I could tell you I live fulltime with my eyes on Jesus and that faith is my constant companion. But being a preacher

¹ (Spiegel & Grau, 2016), pp. 147-150.
doesn’t deliver me from our common humanity. At times during this COVID-19 pandemic, I have focused more on the dangers of nature than on the Lord of nature. I have worried about the church and my place in it. We’ve spent 69 years building this church, nearly 31 of them under my watch. What will the strong wind of COVID do to us? Will we survive it? Or will we sink under its swell? When the storm is over, after worshipping online for all these months so far and those to come, will you come back? Will we deplete all our resources and have nothing left?

And then I read a story like this and I realize I am Peter. I am looking at the wind when I should be looking at the Lord. I am letting fear take root in my heart instead of faith. I am sinking and I feel ashamed of myself. Lord, save me, I cry.

And here’s the beautiful thing in this story. Jesus doesn’t scold before he saves. He reaches out his hand and lifts us up. Only AFTER lifting us up does he say, You of little faith, why did you doubt? And he does that not to make us feel defeated, but to remind us for the next time and the time after that of what is possible if we keep our eyes on him and our hearts set on God.

One of my favorite things about our pastoral residency program is the ongoing peer group we have with more than three dozen colleagues who have come through here. I got a call a couple weeks ago from Britt Carlson in Portland, OR. She is associate pastor of a Mennonite church there. Mennonites are kissing cousins to Baptists, don’t you know?! They have a long history of nonviolent peacemaking. Well, Britt needed a word. She is functioning as the senior pastor this summer while her colleague is on sabbatical.

The protests in downtown Portland were going full throttle in support of Black Lives Matter and against police brutality. Britt believed her church should be there as a witness of the nonviolent approach to change that marks their tradition in the face of others who were acting otherwise out of their frustration and impatience. But when she floated the idea, she got a mixed response from the people in the pew. Imagine that! Some were ready to hit the streets. Some were worried about the church being polarized and politicized. Some thought the church’s best witness was just to be the church
behind the walls of their own building, even if now those walls are now virtual.

She was feeling fearful, worried about her leadership and anxious about the church. Yet she felt in her bones that the church needed to be faithful in uplifting the way of Christ and the dignity of all people.

She called me for pastoral wisdom, since she knows these are not new experiences for me. True. And then it hit me. We would be preaching on this passage in a couple of weeks. We talked about what the wind and waves symbolized, how the church is like the boat with the disciples, and the pastor is Peter, ready to leap out of the boat before the others do. But then even the pastor, like Peter, gets anxious and worried when she looks at the wind and waves.

We asked ourselves what it would be like to focus on Jesus and not the storm or our fear of it. What would we do if we took Jesus to heart and had courage in the face of things?

And as we talked about it, Britt’s voice began to change. I could hear her joy and resolve returning. She was ready to lead. The one who said, Courage, I AM, gave her heart when she needed it most. He lifted her up when she was sinking. I won’t say she was ready to walk on water but walking on water was never the point. It’s what it pointed to. Which is the miracle of faith. The faith that allows us to live above the fray, to ride atop the surf and not to sink.

I don’t know all you all are dealing with in your life right now. COVID, yes. Isolation. Boredom. Unemployment. Cancer. Heart disease. Self-doubt. So many things that amount to the wind and waves that want to sink us but don’t have to.

It’s not that there’s never anything to worry about, any conditions to be wary of, any cause for caution. Good Lord, wear a mask. But we choose whether to be guided by a fear that leaves little room for faith or a faith that leaves little room for fear.

I’ve been noticing more church yard signs these days. Fear Is a Liar, reads one. Fear Stops Here, says another. My current favorite? Courage Is Contagious.

Anytime and every time we live
more by faith and less by fear, we ourselves are signs of the new creation. Let's make our church contagious, Wilshire—contagious by our courage in these days. Amen.