

PROPER 14, PENTECOST 8, YEAR A, AUGUST 13, 2023

There's a well-circulated and very old story about Mark Twain, when he visited the Holy Land. He wanted to take one of the fishing boat rides on the Sea of Galilee. When he found out how much it cost, He said, "No wonder Jesus walked."

There are as many interpretations as there are jokes about Jesus walking on water. Typically, the story is often considered to be about doubt versus faith and that Peter began to sink because he didn't have enough faith. That's a very simplistic and somewhat false interpretation. No where in the gospels does Jesus teach that something terrible is going to happen to us if we have doubts or that we have to have absolute faith for good things to happen. What I do believe is at the heart of this story is fear.

Most of the time we believe the disciples feared the storm but that's not what the story says. We're told they were battling the storm and the wind prevented them from getting to shore. By the next morning they are exhausted physically and emotionally when they see someone walking toward them on the water. They can only assume it's a ghost and this is what terrifies them. It's the uncertainty of who this could be and what it could mean that fills them with fear. But then Jesus calls out to them and tells them to take heart it is just him and there is a collective sigh of relief.

That is except for Peter. Peter wants more reassurance. So he says to Jesus, "If it's you, Jesus, command me to come to you on the water." In the midst of fear and uncertainty, Peter seems to think the way to find out for sure if this apparition walking on water really is Jesus is to leave the relative safety of the boat and come closer toward him across the stormy waves.

Jesus agrees, "C'mon," he says. He tells Peter get out of the boat. And so, Peter does. But after just a few steps, the wind startles him and he begins to sink, crying, "Lord, save me!" Of course, Jesus does save him, but he also asks him this sobering question: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Make no mistake, Peter had faith otherwise he wouldn't have climbed out of the boat. It was when the wind began to pummel him that fear got the better of him and he doubted his own faith in what he believed and who he believed Jesus was.

The issue is where fear leads. Notice the first place that Peter's fear leads him is straight to suspicion and distrust. His fear leads him to test and question Jesus's identity. "If it's you, enable me to do the impossible. If it's you, make magic happen so that I will be dazzled out of all doubt. If it's you, reorder reality and prove to me that you're God."

How often do we do that ourselves? Many have grown up with the belief that God is supposed to protect us from the bad things that happen. God is almost like some genie that is supposed to magically take away all our pain and fears and put everything right when things go wrong.

Many of us have also grown up believing that to be baptized gives us some kind of immunization against the real horrors that life can bring. It's as if the waters of baptism are some kind of sunscreen lotion that we can slather on and it will protect us from all the dangerous elements that we come into contact with. Well, we all know that's not true. And even though life has offered everyone here some tough blows we

still hold onto the belief that God will magically protect us from any further disease or ills.

Jesus question is just as much for us as it was for Peter. Why do we doubt? Why do we doubt who God is and what God is capable of doing in and for us? Again the answer is fear. Like the disciples, sometimes storms pop up in our lives and scare us half to death. But it's not just wind and rainstorms that scare us; so do the metaphorical storms of our lives. Things like global pandemics, social isolation, unhealthy marriages, sick children, unfriendly neighbors, grinding jobs, political discord, horrifying diagnoses, anxiety, panic, depression, economic downturns and inflation can shake us to the core. Let's face it even the future of the church looks bleak as so many find the church or religion in general irrelevant. In the midst of difficult setbacks like these, it's not uncommon for anyone to doubt or to feel their faith in God is not enough. The fear of these life altering storms strikes fear in the most faithful of people. Why does fear take such a hold on us?

Simply put, it's because we are human. Fear is, quite literally, instinctual. We humans are wired with a fight-or-flight response. We have this reflex for a reason. When our lives are in jeopardy or—more commonly for us today—when our identity is threatened, we are naturally inclined to react in fleeing ways. When that happens, we tend to leave calm, rational thought behind. We tend to lash out at others who we think are the cause of our fearfulness. We find it difficult to focus on how to rid ourselves of this fear and find productive solutions that might require a change of mind and heart. After all, we all know change is hard but stagnation can be fatal. Too often we believe failure is not an option but truthfully failure can be regenerative. So for that reason, we often need some assistance getting back to a more faithful frame of mind.

When Jesus asks Peter why does he doubt he's not trying to shame Peter but rather refocus on what's important. In the same way Jesus is also saying to us, Why do you doubt that I am with you, for you, in you, and around you? Look at it from this perspective. Jesus' trajectory never changes. From the very beginning of the story, Jesus moves towards his disciples. He moves towards them when they're struggling at sea and when they decide he's a menacing ghost. He moves towards them when they're terrified by his approach and when Peter is reckless enough to set him a dare. He moves towards them when Peter begins to drown and when he asks for help. He moves towards them when they realize who he is and what he is. In other words, Jesus never stops moving towards us. He never stops crossing the dark water to come to where we are. Neither our fearfulness nor our supposed lack of faith ever alters his steady approach. He just calls us to come to him.

There comes a time in our lives that we realize that there is nothing underneath us except the Grace of God. It is at that moment, when whatever storm is taking us down, that we have to get out of the boat because that is where we are most likely to find the hand of God. In the deep we are apt to discover God's Love that will not let us go. When Jesus hauled Peter into the boat, Peter wasn't being rescued but discovering the hand of God beneath him holding him fast through God's love and grace.

I had a professor in seminary whose son had committed suicide and he told us I've been to the very bottom and I can tell you there is solid ground underneath us. The promise of the gospel is that Christ will always be there, not to catch us or protect us but to support us and encourage us to do even more than we could possibly imagine. It is

in discovering that Grace that enables us to say "yes" when everything or everyone says no. That's when we are called to walk towards Jesus, not having all the answers but being able to live with the unanswered questions, and doubts and take risks so we can live into the mystery of life.

In other words, even in the stormiest times of life, when we most doubt our ability to make it through, we can turn to God. Turning towards God doesn't simply mean going through the motions. It doesn't mean saying the creed or repeating Bible verses from memory. It means for us, just like Peter, refocusing on who is the ground of our being.

God is with us — in every single moment — close enough that even when we come face to face with uncertainty that unravels everything we thought we knew, that is the very place we will see God, who offers us, not the comfort of certainty, but wonder and mercy and love — enough to get us through any storms of doubt and fear.

Jesus is saying to us today this is the way life is. It is fluid and dynamic. It is not static and secure. There is no prop to hold you up. But there is God's Grace. That's why Jesus says come towards me, stop playing it safe, don't let fear paralyze you, take risks and get out of the boat because God's grace and love is always there. You can trust that. That is enough! As a church we need to relearn that. Amen.