

Tenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): “Attempting to Fly on a Trapeze, Walk on Water, and Live the Life of Faith”

1 Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

August 8-9, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

It’s so interesting that this weekend after Isaias blew through here with 80 mile an hour winds and torrential rain, we hear a Gospel about strong winds and great waves battering the beleaguered disciples’ boat. There’s another story earlier in Matthew’s Gospel about a storm at sea when Jesus is traveling **with** His friends (Matthew 8:23-27), and even **then** they’re beside themselves with fear. This time He has shooed them away on their own so He can finally catch up on the solitude He’d been craving ever since He’d heard of John the Baptist’s death. That longed-for time apart had been delayed by the crowd’s success in beating Him to His destination **and** by their need to be both healed and fed.

This is a very **strange** story, really. Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose to walk on water instead of simply taking a boat?? “Maybe He didn’t have one,” you say. But if He didn’t have one, how did He expect to get to the other side of the Sea of Galilee where He’d sent the disciples? Oh, well: it’s a pretty good bet that Jesus’ intent was to **comfort** His friends who were freaked out by the waves swamping their boat and the stiff wind in the middle of a lake big enough to be called a sea.

Unfortunately but kinda predictably, the immediate result of Jesus appearing out of nowhere (as if He’d just “apparated,” in Harry Potter language) is terror, not comfort. Not surprisingly, the disciples see a shadowy human form approaching them over the water, maybe seeming to float along in the dark, and their brains compute “ghost” not “rabbi.” *“And they cried out in fear.”* (Matt. 14:26c) The Source of their salvation has arrived, but instead of recognizing the cavalry coming to their rescue, they see another threat.

Don't we sometimes make the same mistake? We probably only recognize it in retrospect, but God's hand can be very busy on our behalf in the midst of a crisis, while we remain oblivious to the divine presence and deaf to the soft whoosh of the Holy Spirit's wings beating the air.... Another way to put it: God may be creating a masterpiece by writing straight with crooked lines, and all we see is scribble. God is opening a new door for us to pass into ever more abundant life, and all we hear is the slamming shut of the old door that had to close before the new one could open.

Maybe you've visited the American Museum of Natural History in NY, or another wondrous place with a "vivarium," an indoor tropical environment for butterflies. You pass through the outer doors and have to pause in a sealed entryway. The doors behind you must close before the doors in front of you open, so no butterflies can escape the exhibit. The visitor has to overcome fear of being **trapped** between two worlds by **trusting** that the door ahead **will** open. The believer has to overcome fear by **trusting** that when a door shuts behind God **will** open a door ahead. The door ahead doesn't necessarily open immediately, though; sometimes we are left for a while in a holding area between the old and the new! Maybe another example is trapeze artists who have to let go of one trapeze and fly through the air on faith, unsupported, before their hands connect with the next bar.

Once Peter digests the fact that the visitor skimming the tops of the waves is Jesus and not a phantom, he opts for a little showmanship. I don't know how else to understand his bizarre request: "*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*" (Matthew 14:28) Who asks that?? But it was extraordinary times and Peter was no shrinking violet. Jesus is game, beckons Peter to come, and things start out **so** well – Peter steps out of the boat as if onto land and amazingly glides across the water toward the Lord. It's great until

it isn't. The exhilaration doesn't last long. Peter's elation is deflated and his laser-like determination falters when he becomes distracted by the ferocity of the wind. He's scared, and then he begins to sink like a stone. **But** he knows enough to cry out, "*Lord, save me!*" (Matt. 14:30d) There'd be fewer tragedies in this world and fewer dark, dark patches in our lives if we more regularly remembered Who is near to save us and if we more quickly called upon Him.

Despite the seriousness and importance of its message, this is one of those Bible stories that has potentially humorous aspects and generates a lot of cartoons. (Many thanks to Ken O'Brien who keeps me well-supplied with religious funnies!) One of my favorite cartoons shows a Jesus who is **not** amused facing Peter with a big grin on his face and a duckie inner tube around his waist. The caption is: PETER'S EARLY ATTEMPTS TO WALK ON WATER WITH JESUS DISPLAYED AN INADEQUATE AMOUNT OF FAITH. Oh, we of little faith, why **do** we doubt?? Well, we don't like being marooned between here and there, we're unsettled by uncertainty, we're frightened at the prospect of letting go of what's behind before we can actually lay hold of what's ahead, and stepping out of a solid boat onto liquid waves seems like willingly walking the plank toward a watery grave.

We **forget** and so we **fear**. We forget God's promises and we forget God's perfect track record of fulfilling them. We forget what should be a "lesson learned" of both the passage from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings (19:9-18) and today's Gospel: God shares divine power and heavenly authority with God's children. Don't miss the detail that in the first lesson God tells Elijah to anoint Elisha as the prophet to succeed him. (You may recall that after Elijah does that, he's taken to heaven in a fiery chariot!) God had given Elijah power and authority to multiply the jug of oil and the jar of meal of the widow of Zarephath during a

drought (1 Kings 17:7-16). Then God's power was again exercised through Elijah to raise the widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24). Elisha will go on to multiply oil (2 Kings 4:1-7), multiply loaves (2 Kings 4:42-44) and raise another woman's dead son (2 Kings 4:18-37). God's power is transferred from God to one prophet to another.

Jesus shares His divine ability to walk on water with Peter. By doing that, He shares His authority to override chaos, which the wild water represents. More importantly in Matthew's Gospel Jesus shares other forms of divine authority with His brash disciple:

*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18)*

The power to heal Jesus also shares with Peter, and with other disciples, too. Remember the story of the man begging on the steps of the Temple early on in the Book of Acts? He asks Peter and John for money. Peter responds:

*...“I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” (Acts 3:6)*

And the man leapt!

I don't know exactly what encouragement each of you needs this week, but here's a buffet of possibilities from this weekend's Scripture:

- We are never alone in the midst of the storm; Jesus is always close by.
- Stepping out in faith takes chutzpah and courage and practice. Keeping our eyes on Jesus will help us stay afloat.
- If we get distracted by external circumstances and begin to sink under the weight of our fears, “Lord, save me!” is our 911 call.
- We don't have to **beg** God to share divine power and authority with us. God **intends** to do so. We just need to be a willing human channel of God's heavenly healing grace.

Amen

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