

Matthew 14:22-33
10th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14)
August 9, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

"Oh, Jesus! We weren't expecting you. You startled us! But we're not at all surprised by what you're doing."

That might have been a good response. It might be something we would expect the disciples to say if we were hearing this account for the first time. After all, we've already heard back in chapter 8 about Jesus calming the storm. **"What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"** the disciples had pondered. Jesus had also cleansed a leper along the way, healed a centurion's daughter, a paralytic, a blind man, and many others, cast out demons. The disciples had even been sent out in Jesus' name, wielding His power with authority to cast out demons and heal diseases and afflictions. And they had just seen Him miraculously multiply loaves and fishes to feed thousands of people. And yet, they still don't get it.

They have been struggling against the wind. Their boat is far off shore but not as far as they hoped they would be by now. It's not fun. Even the seasoned fishermen know that the sea is to be respected and feared. It can turn on you. This is no time to relax. In Jewish thought, the sea is associated with the abyss and evil. Only God can control it. Or perhaps even a demon or a magician using dark magic.

And then Jesus comes to them. Walking along the sea. Walking on the sea. But their minds don't go to the God of Job who spoke out of the whirlwind, who alone has power to create and control His creation, who commands the sea saying, **"thus far you shall come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed."**^{Job 38:15} This would have been the obvious conclusion, or should have been. They had seen Jesus' power over the sea not too long ago. But their minds go the other direction. They weren't merely afraid; they were terrified. An evil spirit, or someone wielding evil power they suppose.

But then Jesus speaks. **"Take heart. It is I. Stop being afraid!"**

At this point, this is where we often give Peter some credit...maybe too much credit. We praise him for his faith. He sees the Lord and, in faith we suppose, eagerly steps out onto the water. But Peter's words betray him. **"Lord, IF it is you, command me to come to you on the water."** There has to be at least a little bit of faith there. He *is* confident after all that if it is the Lord this can happen. But he doesn't seem too sure, even after Jesus' words which equate to the great I AM statements of John's gospel and the name of God given to Moses. But Jesus indulges Peter.

Sometimes, when God's people ask for something stupid, God gives it to them in order to give them a learning experience. *"We want a king!"* *"No, you don't want a king."* *"No really, we want a king."* *"You're going to regret it."* *"Can we please have a king."* *"Alright."*

"MY will be done." *"I think you meant to say 'thy will.'"* *"No really, thy will is good and all, but I really want MY will."* *"Alright, don't say I didn't warn you."*

But Jesus obliges and says **"come."** So, Peter, being the impetuous guy that he often is, got out of the boat and walked to Jesus on the water. It was the kind of faith that moves mountains—little faith. But now what? What was Peter going to do with that mountain now that he had it? Now, instead of just standing there with Jesus, in awe of Him, Peter began to look at his surroundings. The wind was strong and threatening. And taking his eyes off of Jesus, Peter began to sink into the water. Terror returned.

You've seen this before. Your children have seen it. Perhaps even your grandchildren have seen it. It's the first law of cartoon physics. An external force such as gravity will not act upon you until you acknowledge your predicament. Only after you look down and see your danger will you fall. It seems this is true in cartoons for characters like Wile E. Coyote, Yosemite Sam, and Daffy Duck; and apparently it is also true in real life for a sinking rock like Peter in our Gospel reading.

Here is the learning experience for Peter, an experience that is instructive for us as well. We talk a lot about faith—big faith, little faith, growing in faith, honest faith. But it is not enough to have very powerful and sincere faith if that faith is in the wrong thing. You can have faith that your belt will keep a tight pair of pants from becoming unbuttoned when you bend over. But what good is that when trying to enter God's

Kingdom? You, like Fridfeldt in Bo Giertz's story, whom we heard about a couple of weeks ago, can have faith in the fact that you have "given your heart" to Jesus. But what good is that either, when the heart of man is so corrupt that it only spills evil? The world says "you gotta have faith in yourself." But if you examine yourself in light of the Ten Commandments, do you really want to trust even yourself when salvation is at stake? You can have faith the size of the world, but if that faith has the wrong object, it will do you no good.

Faith in faith expects miracles. It's the kind of moralism that sometimes gets thrown around if we allegorize this gospel reading. "If you just believe enough you can do this or that or the next thing, anything you want." But faith in Jesus expects the same thing Peter expected with the one right thing he did in our reading. When all of his foolish bravado failed him, when the danger surrounding him became very real, when he started to sink into the abyss of the sea, his little faith cried out, "Lord, save me." Faith in faith expects miracles. Faith in Jesus expects saving. And the same hand that would later be stretched out on a cross to save the world, stretched down to save Peter from certain death.

And then Jesus takes Peter back to the boat, the wind ceases, and Peter and the others know what they should have known before. "Truly you are the Son of God." And they worship Jesus.

And yet, the struggle for faith with the right object of faith continues. Along the way, the disciples had different expectations than they should have had. They want only the good life with Jesus. And they wonder why suffering happens along the way, why persecution happens, why rejection happens. And we do too. Peter's doubt and ours begins, not with an unwillingness to step out of a real or metaphorical boat, outside of our comfort zone, but with a difficulty in trusting in God's Word when the real or metaphorical storms arise.

"Lord, I believe. So why is this happening to me? Why now?" "If it is you Jesus, if you are the Son of God, why do so many suffer? Why do I suffer?" "Jesus, if You just give me stronger faith, I could handle it, I could handle anything."

And wouldn't it be better if God did something powerful, something miraculous to prove His Word, to prove He is with us, to prove His power and protection? Something more spectacular to show His power over the sea and the chaos of our lives. When we are being dragged down by circumstances thrust upon us and even those of our own making, wouldn't it be great if there were a sudden calm as we saw Jesus, if we could walk on water, if we could avoid or be prevented from running into any trouble or strife or danger?

"Maybe if we believed more" we think once again. But we keep on sinking. Lower and lower into self-pity, self-righteousness, self-inflicted pain and sorrow. Until we can only see our troubles surrounding us and still more below us so we have to look up. And as we look up we see the same outstretched arm that reached down to save Peter, stretched out upon a cross. And we remember the mission of this One who spoke out of the whirlwind, who calmed the storm, healed the masses, and raised the dead. A sign of weakness, voluntary weakness. And still, in that time of suffering...in any time of suffering, we do the one thing we've done right in our lives. We remember His suffering as we cry out "Lord, save me." Because in His sign of weakness we see great power, power to save all who call upon His name in big faith in Him or in little faith in Him.

Later, when he wrote his first epistle, Peter, whom Jesus had called "little faith," assured his readers what God could do with a little faith. He never mentioned the few steps he took on the water with his own little faith, but he mentioned all three of the things God does with our little faith. God protects our faith, and Peter greets his readers as those "who by God's power are being guarded through faith."²¹ 1 Peter 1:5

God strengthens our faith, and Peter writes that trials and problems come so "the tested genuineness of your faith...may be found."²² 1 Peter 1:7 God gives us eternal life, which is received by faith, and believers are "obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."²³ 1 Peter 1:9

St. Paul says, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Big faith or little faith, in times of trial and terror or in times of comfort and joy, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved from sin and guilt and the grave. And so we will be. And so we are. Amen.