

When Faith Fails, God Doesn't

Matthew 14:22-33

"Follow Jesus and you can have your best life now. Your sorrows will be turned to joys. Your gray skies will be turned to blue. Jesus wants you to succeed. Jesus wants you to prosper. Jesus will take little and make it much. Just come to *Jesus* and your life will be smooth sailing."

Sometimes you will hear preachers talk like that, particularly television preachers. "Become a Christian and all your problems will be solved. Tithe and all your financial woes will disappear. Give your life to Jesus and all manner of problems will be solved."

Well, whoever said that following *Jesus* would make your life smooth sailing, obviously never read our Gospel lesson for today. In today's lesson, Jesus sends the disciples straight into a storm.

In the beginning of the 14th chapter, Jesus had just received the news of the death of John the Baptist. He tried to withdraw for a bit, to be alone to pray and to meditate. But the crowds followed him, and he had compassion and healed their sick. As evening approached, Jesus fed the huge crowd by having the disciples pass out the five loaves and two fish. There was enough to feed the entire crowd, with food left over. Now, by nightfall, Jesus is exhausted, and withdraws to the mountain, for him a place of solitude and peace, so that he can pray and rest. The disciples are left alone, and set out in a boat for home.

Think about some of the images presented in this wonderful gospel story. Think of the terror of the water. Those of us who do not make our living on the sea may tend to romanticize the great seas and oceans of the world. I used to love to visit downtown Detroit, on the shore of Lake Erie, where the Mariners' Church serves those who ply the waters of the Great Lakes to make their living. Each year in November they hold a service in memory of the men who lost their lives when the freighter *Edmond Fitzgerald* sank, tolling the bell of the church 29 times - once for each life that was lost. The people of the Mariners' Church know, like the disciples, four of whom - Peter and Andrew, John and James. - were fishermen, the terrible power of the water.

In the Bible, the sea is often depicted as the habitation for demonic spirits and the forces of evil. At creation, water is the unformed primeval chaos. In the book of Job, God battles Rahab in the sea. In Isaiah, God slays Leviathan whose habitation is the ocean. The tiny Letter of Jude describes the "*enemies of religion*" as "*fierce waves of the sea casting up the foam of their own sin.*" Finally in Revelation, God triumphs over evil at which point the sea vanishes.

But the boat is also an ancient symbol for the church. So Matthew has the story working at two levels here. It is first a story about Jesus and his disciples; about the way in which Jesus is willing and able to leave the solitude of prayer and his own struggles with his destiny and wades into

the stormy sea to save his perishing disciples. But it is also a story about us, about the way we, in the middle of our contemporary stormy seas, cry out to be saved and Jesus comes to us, inviting us to come to him, picking us up, reassuring us, stilling the storm.

The disciples have picked a lousy night for a midnight cruise. The waves and the wind were tossing them around. The situation was terribly frightening, and then it seemed to get worse. Through the spray, something eerie appeared. It looked like someone walking on the water, but that couldn't be.

So here again comes Peter. On rough seas, in the dark of night, eyes burning from the wind or maybe from too many belts of wine. And he blurts out, "*Maybe it's a ghost. Or maybe it's Jesus. If it really is you, Lord, command me to walk on the water.*"

Why would Peter say that? Well, here they have been trying to steer a course into this storm all night. They're tired. They're cold. They're wet. I would think Peter would say, "Jesus, if that's really you, then make this storm stop, like you did once before." But he doesn't.

If I'm in a boat being battered by waves, seasick and tired, out on seas that are tossing my boat around like a toy, the last place I would think to ask to go would be out of the boat. But when the ghostly figure comes walking out to them on the water and identifies himself as Jesus, the first way Peter thinks of for him to prove it was to ask to walk on water.

Why would this be the thing that Peter would ask of Jesus?

To understand Peter's request, I think we have to understand a little about the background of Jesus' world. See, Peter was Jesus' *disciple*. When we think of the word *disciple*, we generally equate it with the word *student*. When we think of disciples, we often think of the original 12 people – later joined by others - who sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his teachings. A disciple is somebody who knows what his master knows.

But a disciple is also one who wanted to *do* what his teacher did. A disciple wanted to *talk* like his teacher talked. A disciple wanted to *walk* like his teacher walked. A disciple devoted his entire life to *being just like* his (or her) rabbi.

So Peter is just being a good disciple when he asks to walk on water with Jesus. He wants to do what his rabbi is doing. He wants to be just like Jesus walking on the waves. Because Jesus is walking on the whitecaps, Peter wants to, too.

But notice that Peter doesn't just jump out of the boat and start walking. He's smart enough to know that if he's going to do something as impossible as walking on water, it will be because Jesus calls him. And if Jesus calls him, then it's sort of understood that Jesus will make the impossible possible. Peter knows that if he just hops out on his own initiative, he will sink like a rock. But if Jesus calls him out of the boat to walk on the water, it will be like he's walking on solid ground. So Peter says, "*Lord, if it is you please call me to come to you on the water. Call me*

to do what you are doing. Call me to be like you."

It's not the first time Jesus has called his disciples to do something that seems impossible. He's already called his disciples to turn the other cheek if somebody walks up to them and clocks them in the face. He's already called his disciples to walk two miles if anybody asks them to walk one. He's already called his disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. He's already called his disciples to be perfect, just like their Father in heaven is perfect. He has already called his disciples to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. He's already called his disciples to follow him wherever he goes - even to the cross. So, it shouldn't come as a surprise when Jesus honors Peter's request and again calls him to do the impossible - *"Okay, Peter, come to me. Walk on this water."*

Up until this point in the story, Peter has been the model disciple. He is willing to take a risk, jump out of the boat, and try the impossible at Jesus' command. He desperately wants to be like Jesus, no matter what. Even if it means jumping out into the unknown, walking across the deep, dark, raging waters. Peter is a great example of what to do.

But, as is usually the case with Peter, he is also an example of what not to do. He's bold. He hops out of the boat. He takes a couple of steps on the water, but then the wind blows. Whitecaps break over his feet. He loses his nerve, and suddenly he starts to sink like a rock.

Perhaps Peter didn't just doubt Jesus, maybe he doubted *himself*. He was such an ordinary person and here Jesus was calling him to do something extraordinary. Maybe Jesus is calling you to do something impossible, but the wind has picked up and doubt has crept in, and you feel like you're sinking. Maybe you've jumped out into the unknown and now you feel like you're in way over your head. Or, maybe you hear the call of Jesus to do some miraculous deed, but you're too afraid to get out of the boat in the first place.

Remember, Jesus said, *"You didn't choose me, I chose you."* A rabbi doesn't choose you unless he has faith in you. Yes, we should have faith in Jesus, but we should also remember: Jesus has faith in *us*.

Our faith is reasonably sturdy stuff - so long as the dangers we face are minimal and the risks we face are modest. Beyond that, it is sort of touch and go. We don't want to end up like Peter and get in over our heads. Even the most daring and dedicated of us have our limits. We have faith, but we don't want our faith to make fools of us. Consequently, we don't stray very far from the tried and true.

God doesn't stop working for our good just because our faith is too small. The faith of the Israelites faltered in the wilderness when they saw the Egyptian army on their heels. Peter's faith faltered when he paid more attention to the wind and the waves at his feet than he did to Jesus. But the limits of faith are not the limits of God's power. Even in the face of uncertainty, God has reached out to save God's people, again and again. And God still does.

There is a story about a man who asked a Mississippi river-boat captain how long he had been at his trade. The captain replied, "Twenty-six years." "Then," said the man, "I guess you know where all the rocks are, all the shoals and all the sandbars. "No," said the captain, "I just know where they ain't." The Church doesn't always know what God has planned for it in the days ahead. But we know that Christ walks with us, and that God's grace is sure.

Finally in our gospel story, as Peter is about to go down for the third time (one for each denial), Jesus pulls him up and rescues him from the currents. They both get into the boat. Grace abounds, but it sure is wet! And as Jesus saves Peter from the perils of the deep, he adds a touch of judgment. Peter is flat on his back, exhausted, on the slimy, fish-stained deck. Jesus stands over him and asks, "Why such little faith, Peter? Why so much trouble staying on task? You were doing so well. Now what is your problem?"

It is a question Peter is not willing to answer. But Jesus will stay until he does. There with them all. The storm will pass, and the fourth watch shall end. Then the sun will peek over the horizon, and we will realize that sometimes it is when our faith is the most severely tried that God works most powerfully.

Rev. John W. Caster
Trinity Presbyterian Church
August 13, 2017