**Proper 14A 2014 sermon**

August 10, 2014

*Matthew 14:22-33*

*Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."*

Peter, first among the disciples, is acting his usual impetuous and cocky self. How foolish and wrong-headed can he be, thinking that **he** could walk on water? What ego inflation! So of course, he gets his comeuppance: He thought that he could do what only God does, but he ended up, quite literally, over his head.

That was the interpretation I *used* to put on this passage. “[God] alone… walks on the waves of the sea,” reads the Book of Job. (9:8, NCV) And if only **God** can walk on water,I thought, it is the height of arrogance to ask God to allow **you** to do so. Thus Peter, in this passage, was being arrogant.

But I now realize that there is little support in our Gospel text itself for this interpretation. Nowhere does Jesus *scold* Peter for his request, and when Peter sinks, Jesus doesn’t say, “I told you so!” or “See, that’s what happens when you’re arrogant and want to do what only God can do!” In fact, Jesus is very *open* to Peter’s request, and he seems to imply that the problem is not Peter’s *arrogance*, but rather his little faith – which is a very different thing altogether.

Jesus and his disciples have just participated in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, about which we read last week. Jesus feels the need to go off by himself to pray, so he sends his disciples in a boat to go across the Sea of Galilee ahead of him. They toil all night in the boat, and Matthew tells us “the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.” Then, early in the morning they see Jesus coming to them on the water and think him to be a ghost. Battered by frightening wind and waves and now haunted by a ghost – I can only imagine the disciples’ terror! Seeing their fear, Jesus immediately calls to them, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” And Peter answers, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Now it is important to remember that throughout the Bible the sea symbolizes chaos and terror. To even *consider* stepping out of that boat onto the waves in the midst of strong winds would have been *unthinkable* to a First-Century Jew. And note that Peter does **not** ask to *walk on the water*; he asks to be given the grace to *come to Jesus* on the water – and that is a totally different matter. I believe that in telling the story the way he does, Matthew is telling us that Peter wants to be enabled to come to Jesus in the very **midst** of the chaos, fears, tumults, tempests, dangers and storms of this world. It is *not* a wrong-headed, egotistical, miracle-seeking request Peter makes. Rather, Peter discerns – unconsciously, in his heart – that the solution to his abject fear in the midst of this storm is to draw near to Jesus. Not to wait for Jesus to come to him, but to move, himself, toward God’s Incarnate Presence, trusting that God Himself **is** *truly* there in the very midst of the chaos and terror; it is not just a phantom of his wishful hoping that God be present. Jesus immediately grants Peter’s request, for Jesus *always* invites us, encourages us, yearns for us to come to him amid the storms of our lives. And so Jesus speaks that one little word of invitation which he speaks to so many people throughout the Gospels: “Come.” “Come to me,” he tells Peter, in effect. “Enter into the spirit of God which triumphs over fear and terror.”

I now believe that the story is *not* *about* physically walking on water at all; it is not about Jesus doing some gravity-defying miracle and then seeing if Peter could do it, too – thereby proving his faith. In truth, throughout the Gospels, Jesus **refuses** requests to perform flashy miracles as proof he has power from God. (e.g. Matthew 12:38-39) Jesus *only* performs miracles to heal, restore, and make whole – **never** as a flashy show to wow the audience or prove his own power. So I cannot believe that his invitation to Peter to come to him is in any way a show of power or a test of faith; that’s *not* how Jesus works. What is happening in this Gospel story is that Jesus is inviting Peter to come to him in the midst of his fears and the tempests of life, to trust that God **can** overcome the battering waves, the powerful winds, and the storms of life if we will but walk with Jesus through those storms. What is needed, when we are in the midst of such storms, is that we trust that Jesus, the one who loves us and cares for us, is truly **there** for us – and not some imaginary ghost trying to trick us into hoping for something that God cannot deliver. Jesus calls Peter to a *real* faith in the *real* presence of God.

Walking out into the chaos and tumult of life with firm faith in God’s presence is not foolishness; it is *exactly* what God **wants** us to do: to enter into the empowering presence and spirit of Christ, and to *live* **in** that spirit as we travel the storms of this life.

And note that in our Gospel it symbolically *works*, at least at first! Peter **does** take some steps on the waves – he does step out in faith! But then what happens? Fr. John Shea writes this: “Initially, with his eyes on Jesus, he is a fearless walker of the waves. But then his consciousness shifts from Jesus to the strong winds. As the strength of the resisting winds fills his mind, it also captures his emotions and he becomes frightened… His doubting came when he allowed what threatened him to capture his mind and heart more completely than what calmed him. His inner focus on the reality of Jesus was replaced by an outer preoccupation with the wind.” (*On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press 2004, pp. 248-249)

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Where does *your* consciousness reside? With the **spiritual** reality and power of God, or with all the turbulent, violent, unsettled turmoils which beset our world? Where do you fix your consciousness? To what or to whom do you trust your body, mind, and soul? Where do you live most of the time? Early in John’s gospel, at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, two of John the Baptist’s disciples leave John and take off after Jesus. When Jesus turns to them, they ask him, “Where are you staying?” And he answers, “Come and see.” It is an invitation for them to live in the reality of his presence.

Where are **you** staying? Where does your heart, your mind, your body stay?

Again, John Shea writes: “Peter does not walk on the water then sink because he is impetuous and does not know his place. He walks on the water and then sinks because he is learning the path of confronting what threatens life while working with his own fear… This is the adventure in faith, trying to stay so focused on God’s enabling presence that the resistant winds do not defeat us. The way the **wind** works is to create fear. Fear captures the mind and pulls it out of God’s presence. This shift in the mind’s attention is what it means to doubt.” (*ibid*., pp. 250-251)

“You of little faith,” Jesus tells Peter. “Why did you doubt? Why did you allow fear to pull your consciousness away from me, and from the reality of my presence, my Kingdom?”

Like Peter and his fellow disciples in the storm-tossed boat, Jesus invites **us** to come to him in the very midst of the physical, psychological, and social storms that batter us. He invites us to enter into his own abiding consciousness of God’s presence, to share in his very existence in God. He invites us out of fear into trust.

Earlier in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus sent his disciples out with the command and empowerment to “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” (10:8) Jesus **wants** us to walk through life as workers of healing, as he was, walking through life unconquered by the storms. We do so as we fix our consciousness – our minds, our hearts, our selves – in his kingdom, living in him, and inviting him to live in us.

For God’s will is that we **all** become tempest travelers and wave walkers.

 AMEN