

SERMON on Mathew 14: 22-33: ARE YOU IN THE BOAT OR OUT?

This morning's Gospel reading is one of the most well known in the New Testament. The account of Jesus and Peter walking on the water has much to teach us.

Why is it that something tragic needs to happen in order for people to get re-oriented and re-focused on the important things in life? You know what I mean. You see it all the time when someone receives bad news from the doctor. It's amazing how "religious" people get after that. It's amazing how you never see them before the diagnosis, but after reality hits, they're in church—religiously (no pun intended)—at least until the danger has passed, either by recovery or by death.

You see the same thing all the time at funerals. It's amazing how loving and selfless and religious people get when death hits close to home. It's sad to think about, but for some of us it's going to take our own funeral to finally get some of our loved ones back into church. Many of my family only get together now at funerals, **and that, is sad.** I hate to think that it takes that sort of tragedy to get all of us into church together, or together at all, but sometimes that's just how it is. We all know this. Like it or not, there are more than a few people who view church and prayer and faith as nothing more than one big rabbit's foot that needs to be rubbed when tragedy hits and the chips are down.

I remember back in the 1970's flying from a First Nations Village on the coast north of Prince Rupert with my basketball team and we hit gale force winds. In a small 12 seat plane nonetheless! When the plane started to dip and sway and eventually drop 20ft. I said a prayer and a promise, bartering with God. **“Oh God, get me safely on the ground and I'll never sin again”!!!** Or something like that! Well, I did get on the ground and my not sinning lasted....well....**let's say not long enough!!** Once the prayers have been answered, once the dust has settled and life is back to humming along...well, we can put that rabbit's foot away again, at least until the next tragedy comes along. A tragic faith, indeed!!!

It is with this ugly reality in mind that we turn our attention to the Gospel lesson for this morning. But whose tragic faith do we focus on today? The answer may surprise you. You see, whenever this lesson comes up, it's St. Peter who gets all the attention, perhaps even more than Christ Jesus. We hear the words of the lesson and shake our heads in shameful disbelief. What a man of little faith! He took his eyes off Jesus—his eyes of faith—and began to sink. He stopped focusing on Christ and instead focused on and worried about all the wind and waves and everything else around him. No wonder he sank! Thank God he had enough faith to at least call out to Christ to save him. Yes sir, what a tragic little faith.

Well...we might be right in our interpretation regarding St. Peter, but his tragic faith isn't the focus of our meditation this morning. What about all those other disciples who remained in the boat? What about their tragic little faith? "Tragic faith? How can we say such a thing?"

It says in verse 33 that they all worshiped Jesus as the Son of God." They did worship Jesus...after they had their spirits broken by the terrifying storm; after they cried out in fear that a ghost was hunting them down; after they saw Jesus save Peter from certain death; after Jesus got into the boat, safe and secure with them. I don't know about you, but that sounds an awful lot like the same sort of faith we see all the time; the "faith" that only comes to life and shows itself after a sobering, cage-rattling tragedy.

Where were the other eleven disciples the entire time this was going on? They were cowering in fear and doubt in the boat. Every one of them cried out in terror when things got bleak. Every one of them thought this was it. They were goners. Every one of them heard the words of Christ piercing the storm, commanding them to have no fear, for almighty God Himself was right there with them. **"Fear not, for it is I."**

This is where we can give Peter credit. He heard these words and trusted. Peter was willing to get out of the boat. The same can't be said for the others.

They heard the words, **"Do not be afraid"**. These are words that are easy enough to hear, but they're really tough to put into practice. The disciples in our text serve as prime examples of this reality. The Lord sent them on their way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, while He dismissed the crowds whom He had just fed with only five loaves of bread and two fish. He sent them away, dismissing them, perhaps by pronouncing a blessing on them.

Then He went up on the mountain to pray. When He finished praying, He was by Himself, and His disciples were attempting to cross the sea but were facing a very stiff wind and the waves crashing down on them. The Lord then proceeded to go to them, **walking on the water.**

The disciples had had a long day, made longer by the wind and the waves beating on them. They probably didn't get very much sleep that night. When you are sleep-deprived, what begins to happen? You start imagining you're hearing and seeing some weird things happening. So let's set the scene: it's dark outside, between 3 and 6 in the morning; the disciples were very tired but were battling wind and waves; and here comes Jesus, walking ON the water, heading right toward them. Our text tells us the disciples were terrified, thought Jesus to be a ghost, and cried out in fear.

So what happened next? Jesus knew their fear. He knew they were afraid. He knew they needed to be comforted. Matthew, himself likely to be in the boat with the rest of his fellow disciples, notes that Jesus **immediately** spoke to them, saying, **"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."** He brought them words of comfort. He did it **immediately**.

Peter wanted Jesus, if it really **WAS** Jesus on the water, to command him to come to Him on the water. Since it really was Jesus, Jesus really did call Peter to come to Him on the water. And Peter really did begin to walk on the water himself. What came next? Peter took his eyes off Jesus and caught a glimpse of the wind and waves, and he began to sink like a rock. He was petrified that he was sinking.

When we hear this story, it doesn't take us long to realize that we are just like Peter and the rest of the disciples. You see, we like to be in control of the situations in which we find ourselves. And when things appear to be out of or beyond our control, we don't feel too good about things. We become quite uncomfortable, and we start to worry. That worry turns into fear. We worry about, and we are afraid of, what the future might bring, whether it has to do with our work, finances, illness, the uncertainty of this pandemic...or even our future as a congregation.

There are a lot of things going on that take our eyes off Jesus. Like Peter, we see the wind and waves, and our faith begins to shrink. We see numbers declining in membership and, at different times, our finances. We have been a vacant congregation for almost 5 months, not together at all and now only with part of our congregation. We thought we were certain about things at one time. We may become afraid we might not be able to sit here all together in this uncertain future. We may take our eyes off Jesus and look to ourselves for the answers. This is because we lack a proper First Commandment relationship with God, **as we do not fear, love, and trust in Him above all things.**

This is where humble repentance comes into play. If we're honest, every single one of us can relate. Every single one of us must confess that we do spend a lot of time inside the safety of the boat, making excuses, waiting to see how things turn out, turning back to Christ only after the "**all-clear**" has sounded on whatever "**tragedy**" has befallen us. I think we can all recognize how uncomfortable—downright terrified—we can be with getting out of our comfort zone when it comes to matters of faith.

It's easy to worship God inside the safe confines of these walls on Sunday morning, but it's quite another thing to faithfully walk without fear out among the storm-tossed sea that we call "**everyday life.**" It's easy to worship God when things are going well, but it's quite another thing to get out of the boat and faithfully and fearlessly follow when times are tight and things don't look good.

"If I do this, I won't have enough money left over for gas or milk or the electric bill or my cellphone bill or my vacation." Yes—there is a lesson on stewardship here! Giving God the scraps and leftovers is a lot like worshiping Him from the safety of the boat after the all-clear is sounded and the danger has passed.

"O you of little faith, why do you doubt? Take heart! Be not afraid, for it is I, the great I Am; the I Am who is with you always, to the very end of the age."

That's our lesson for today. This is the Good News and peace that surpasses all human understanding. This is our life preserver. Christ Jesus is always with us, no matter how bad things may seem. He is with us before, during, and after the tragedies of life, which is more than we can say when it comes to our relationship with Him. He never leaves us. Christ Jesus is always with us, even in those places that we would never think to look for Him. He's always right here with us, reaching out to us through His Word and His

Sacrament, reaching out to us and saving us with His sure and certain promise that He will never leave us or forsake us.

Yes, more often than not we do have a small, tragic, conditional faith. But...we still have faith; the free and unmerited gift of saving faith that He works in us through the Holy Spirit in His Word! Thanks be to God that He never looks at our little tragic, conditional faith and says, "I don't think so. It's not worth my time or my trouble." Thank God He blesses us with that simple, yet powerful gift of saving faith that is wise enough in the midst of tragedy and sin to cry out, "Lord God, save me!"

Thanks be to God for the simple gift of faith that reaches out and takes hold of our Lord's already out-stretched hand, knowing and trusting that He, and He alone, is our Rock and our Salvation, for He has paid the wages of sin for every single person in full with His own body and blood on His cross. We are saved—completely and eternally—because of the grace God shows us; grace which is ours only because of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

Although today's Gospel is certainly not a parable, but a real historical event, we can still use it to remind us of Christ's mercy and grace in our lives. Ever since the days of Noah and the great flood, the boat has been a symbol of Christ's church. There are times when we are not satisfied with the Word that Jesus gives to us in His boat, the church. Like Peter, we want a bigger experience. We want more emotion. We want more pizzazz. We want more pep. So we leave the church in order to find a greater experience ... something that is a little more spectacular than the same old, same old. We put our faith in our feelings instead of in God's promise.

So, here they were, in a boat on rough waters, afraid and without their leader. Compounding the problem was the apostle's mindset regarding tempests at sea. In the ancient world the tempest represented the chaos and the utter uncertainty of life and of the world. There was even a notion that evil lurked within the tempest. It's little wonder then that when they saw Jesus walking on the water they thought He was a ghost.

The whole scenario though, while seemingly chaotic, uncertain and frightening, had actually been orchestrated by God. God was testing the disciple's faith. God does that sometimes, you know. He tests our faith, not, mind you, to weaken it, but to strengthen it and to purify it.

Not wanting to leave the disciples in fear, Jesus immediately spoke to them. "Take heart (He said); it is I. Do not be afraid." That is always the first word from Jesus when chaos and uncertainty seem to be winning the day. "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." The promise, spoken literally to the apostle's, is implied to you through all the promises God has made to you. "If God is for you, who can be against you?"

As you know, fears and worries come in all sorts of sizes and shapes. Some people worry about big things, world events and global disasters. In this day and age we have certainly lots of those in our lives. Others worry about more personal things, family crises and so forth. And, of course, some people worry about virtually everything.

One day at the seminary in Germany a professor posed a question to his students. Luther, he said, was sitting in his study when a young pastor came into the room with his head drooped low. He was obviously distraught over something. Luther asked him what was wrong. He said, "I feel so ashamed. Sometimes I have trouble believing the very things I preach."

The professor asked what sort of council the students would give to the young preacher, were he to have come to them instead of Luther. Just about unanimously they said he should probably find another calling. I mean, a man in the ministry who sometimes doubts what he preaches didn't seem like a good thing.

After they had spilled their sanctimonious reasons as to why the young man didn't belong in the ministry, the professor said, "do you know what Luther said to the young pastor?" Luther, he said, "raised his head and with a big smile on his face, he said to the young man, **'thanks be to God! I thought I was the only one!'**"

While we don't mean to encourage doubt, or, even to trivialize it, the fact is, we all have our doubts. Doubt is part of the human condition. That said, "doubt is always in vain and left unchecked it can be quite dangerous." When Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water, he was filled with faith. He reasoned that if Jesus' commanded him to do it, he could do it. That's how faith works, isn't it? If God commands it, it's done! If He says you are forgiven, you are forgiven! If He says bread and wine are His body and blood, they are His body and blood. If He says water and the word bring you new life, then water and the word bring you new life! Faith believes that what God says!

When Jesus commanded Peter to walk on the water, he walked on the water! Unfortunately, moments later, Peter said, "wait a minute. What am I doing? I'm walking on water!" "People, you know, don't walk on water. Especially water like this! It's roaring and foaming! It's eerie and maybe filled with all sorts of evils. What am I doing? Why didn't I stay in the boat where I belong?"

In a matter of seconds Peter began to believe what he saw and experienced, over and above what God promised. It's hard for us to fault him for his little faith because we're quite often in the same boat, so to speak. We tend to believe and trust what our eyes see and experience over what God promises.

Finally, in desperation, Peter did what a person of faith does. He looked to the One in whom His faith resided, Jesus, the author and perfecter of his faith. And He called out to Him, “Jesus save me.” “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

I’d like to go back for a minute to the tempest at sea as an image of chaos and uncertainty. There is another image wrapped up in this whole story, the image of the boat and the church. It isn’t by accident that, when Peter began to sink, due to his doubts and fears, Jesus picked him up and put him back in the boat. I mean, He could have set him safely, but all alone, on the shore on the other side. But, He didn’t. He picked him up and put him back in the boat with the other disciples.

It is also important to note that Jesus’ presence in the boat calmed the storm and the disciples then acknowledged who He is and worshiped Him while they were in the boat. The boat became, as it was in the days of Noah, a safe haven, a place of salvation and certainty in the midst of a world of chaos and uncertainty.

Roger’s story:

A good friend of mine from my last church, named Roger, was at a retreat where they were discussing this exact passage from scripture and they were struggling with it. They were then asked to do Imaginary Prayer.

The instructions were to place oneself in the scene of this story. The first time Roger was only an observer. He saw the disciples rowing like crazy hoping to save their lives. They were almost oblivious to Peter getting out of the boat and walking toward Jesus. They did see the ghost but that caused them to fear more than to have the hope of being saved. On that occasion, Roger felt like a reporter. Quite uninvolved.

The second time Roger prayed this prayer his imagination took him to the place of being a rower. He was rowing like a crazy man trying to save his life and the others. He barely looked at Jesus. He was focused on saving his skin.

Later, Roger met with the leader of the retreat and he told Roger to prayer again but this time to “get out of the boat and walk toward Jesus.” This seemed way too personal to Roger. He was more comfortable being an observer. Roger was told to imagine the sea raging and Jesus waiting for Peter (or ourselves) to have the courage to step out on the waves and walk toward Jesus. The picture and exercise helped him to equate this turbulent world to the raging sea and visualize Jesus as our hope and safety in the midst of calamity. Sometimes simply everyday calamity, in other words, focus our minds and hearts on Him, moment by moment in everyday life in order to maintain His Peace, Presence and Security.

Roger tried to pray again and this time he had been challenged to get out of the boat and walk toward Jesus. Getting out was difficult. Finally he managed to get out of the boat and became oblivious to the others. As he walked toward Jesus he wanted to look at His face but was too focused on the water around him. As he sensed getting closer to Jesus he found himself sinking. He didn't panic but the water started to surround him when a very large hand reached out and grabbed his. The grip was what was memorable. Roger could sense the immense power in Jesus' hand, a power that could have crushed his. But the feeling was one of safety and security. Roger was no longer aware of the waves.

Friends, we are in the boat now! Out there is a tempest of chaos and uncertainty. In here is the living presence of Christ. Jesus comes to us here in order to go with us there. Day by day we cry out "Lord, save me," and He does just that. His arms stretched out, His hands pierced and bloodied, He grasps hold of us and He shelters us.

We all know someone who has left the boat and is out there trying to walk on water. In fact we were once out trying to walk on water ourselves -- and may indeed try it again some day.

And now, it is for us who remain in the boat to stretch out our hands, cast out the nets our Lord has given us and bring the flailing, sinking people that remain out there in the stormy world into the boat with us. We don't have to walk on water - in fact we dare not. For like Peter, and rocks, if and when we do we are sure to sink as well.

"O you of little faith, why did you doubt? Be of good cheer! I AM! Do not be afraid." These are Jesus words for us today and everyday. For He came not just to walk on water, and certainly not to make us walk on water - it is not necessary. He came to walk to the cross bearing all of our sin. Let's walk with Him.

AMEN