

**Proper 14A, August 9, 2020, St. Anne's
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14: 22-33**

Today's gospel is another well-known miracle story –Jesus walking on the water. In some ways, this seems quite different from the other 'wonder stories' about Jesus because no one seems to be *helped* here as they are when the miracle is a healing or exorcism or involves *feeding* hungry people. The text doesn't even suggest that Jesus was coming out to save the disciples from the heavy waves. So, if you take the story at face value it's easy to think that it's just about Jesus doing something amazing. In fact, we jokingly talk about someone being able to 'walk on water' as a way of saying they're able to do 'amazing' things. But I suspect Matthew is *not* just telling us about Jesus aquatic abilities, he's trying to tell us something more.

Today's story immediately follows the feeding of the 5000 we heard last Sunday. After the meal, Jesus commands the disciples to get into the boat and go, while he stays behind to pray alone – so they do. If you're familiar with big lakes you know that fierce storms can come up very fast on them. And that's true of the Galilee - which although we *call* it a sea is really just a lake. Many of the disciples were fishers, so they would've known what to do when a big storm hit – which is to 'ride the storm out'. It's not actually a good idea to try to land a boat in the midst of a big storm since you risk breaking the boat on the rocks when trying to beach it. Unlike the other 'Jesus and the disciples in a boat' story where Jesus is woken by the terrified disciples and then calms the storm, there's no indication in **this** story that the disciples are terrified by the storm. Although they probably *are* exhausted from struggling with it for hours. Sometime between 3 and 6 am Jesus decides to join them. Which means it's probably still dark, as well as stormy, when they see Jesus walking towards them on the water. So we can hardly blame the

disciples for not recognizing him. And given the common perception in that time of the sea as the locus of evil and chaos, it's also not surprising that they initially think he's a specter of death and they grow alarmed as he draws near. In *this* story, they aren't afraid of the **storm** they're afraid of **Jesus**. In response, Jesus calls out to them - it's ok, it's me.

But then Peter, being *Peter*, challenges him saying “**IF** it **is** you, command me to come to you on the water.” Which, I have to say for *me*, raises the question of just *what* Peter thinks he's doing! I mean, what in the **world** would compel someone in a boat in the middle of a storm to say, “Command me to come to you”? Does Peter think being able to walk on water will help him *believe* that it really **is** Jesus? Or does he hope that stepping out on the sea, will be the act of courage he needs for greater faith? Maybe, he wonders if he'll be convinced of Jesus' promises if he 'thinks big'? Or does he think he'll believe in *himself* more if **he** is able to do what Jesus does? Or maybe he's just *excited* at the prospect of the *adventure* of joining Jesus amid the waves? Whatever his *intent*, at Jesus's invitation, Peter *steps out* of the boat. But then, he's quickly overwhelmed by just how *big* those waves **are**, and he starts to sink. Which of course, often leads preachers to remind us that we should keep our eyes on Jesus – focus on the Lord. Keep your eyes on Jesus and don't let troubles lead you to doubt and fear. Which is, of course, good advice - imploring us to a livelier, more trusting faith than we often seem to manifest.

And yet... and yet, if I'm *honest*, I know that when the metaphorical waves of **my** life are at their height my problem **isn't** that I don't *know* I *should* trust Jesus. I picked that up pretty early in in my faith life and I haven't forgotten that's what I **should** do. It's just that all too often I get distracted, worried, sometimes even

overwhelmed by the metaphorical waves around me. Economic, political, social, medical, ecclesial – the world is **full** of troubles and some of them are **huge**. And while I *know* that I **should** just ‘trust them all to the Lord’, it just isn’t always that *easy*.

But... when impetuous Peter jumps out of the boat and then, surprise, surprise - gets distracted by the storm and starts to sink- *Jesus doesn’t* give him good advice, nor does he *chastise* Peter for sinking – Jesus grabs hold of him and holds him up. Yes, Peter ‘should’ have kept his eyes on Jesus...and so should we. But when we **don’t**, when we falter, when invariably we **fail**, Jesus *is* there to *catch* us and support us.

So maybe the question we really need to ask ourselves is whether we actually **expect** God to show up in our life? Even if we can’t ‘keep our eye on Jesus’ in the midst of a **storm**, do we at least keep a lookout for his presence in our life when we **aren’t** in the midst of a big storm? Because, quite honestly if you wait till the *storm* is **here** before focusing on your faith, before you pay attention to where God is in your life, then you probably **will** be too distracted to be able to *notice* God while you’re in the storm. So maybe what we need to do, is to try to be more aware of God acting in our life during *ordinary* times. Noticing when God is reaching out to us in the *small* things so we’re in practice and **can** be aware of God when the “big storm” hits. Because God never promises that we **won’t** find ourselves in the middle of a storm. And we probably **will** feel overwhelmed when it does. But ‘faith’ is trust that God **is** still there with us even **when** we’re **feeling** overwhelmed. And that God **is** holding on to us when times are rough – although often we can only see it in hindsight. So maybe, risking jumping out of the boat when Jesus calls us to come is not always a bad idea...

And then there's that comment Jesus makes about 'little faith'. We often assume Jesus says to Peter "you of little faith" as a condemnation – in other words we assume that Peter *wouldn't* have sunk in the first place if he'd just had 'more' faith. But *maybe* that's us projecting our own fears into the story. Maybe Jesus is reminding Peter that he *already* has **all** the faith he needs. Because Jesus addresses his followers as people of "little faith" repeatedly in Matthew's gospel and it's **not** always a condemnation. A couple of chapters from where we are now, Jesus tells the disciples they have 'little faith', and then says, "if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it *will move*; and nothing will be impossible for you." So just how much faith do you **need** to make a difference in your life, or even to change the world? Not much apparently. Just a little.

So, why **did** Peter jump out of the boat when Jesus came calling? Was he just impetuous? Well, possibly, but *maybe* his time with Jesus helped him to see that **much more** is *possible* than we usually imagine. While God **is** there to help us when times are rough, I think God wants *more* for us than **just** safety and stability. God also invites us to a more *adventurous* life of faith as well. And so maybe this is one instance when impetuous Peter **is** a role model for us. Because Jesus is *always* calling us to **risk** and **grow** and live *into* the abundant life God has promised us - trusting that God **is** *always* with us, whether we're aware of it or not.