

## **Pentecost 10A**

**Matthew 14.22-33**

**Sunday, August 9, 2020**

Years ago there was a wonderful story about a fixture that the tourism bureau in Israel installed in the Sea of Galilee. A platform dock of sorts was created and placed just below the surface of the water in the Galilean lake. For all the tourists coming to see the place described in Matthew's gospel for today where Jesus supposedly walked on the water, they could have pictures taken of themselves in a similar pose. Oh, that Peter had such a platform. Life would have been so much easier. Or, at least, his experience on the Sea of Galilee would have been so much more enjoyable.

Yet, had there been a platform for Peter, we would lose out on such a provocative and instructive story. To begin, the story of Peter sinking is educational. In a phrase? Watch what you ask for. We are familiar with the story. Jesus sends the disciples on ahead after he feeds the 5000. The lake is rough throughout the night. In the morning, the disciples see Jesus walking toward them and think he is a ghost. Peter just can't get out of his own way, opens his big mouth, and asks for proof that it is Jesus. He says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Wrong thing to say. Jesus responds, "Come." And so Peter takes some fledgling steps on the water, only to be undone by the strong wind of the lake. He begins to sink. Jesus saves him, and wonders about Peter's lack of faith.

Again, watch what you ask for!

However, when we get past the humor of the story, the resonance of what Peter and the other disciples face is uncomfortably real. We just lived through tropical storm Isaias and its destruction of trees, power lines, and our routines were considerable and challenging. As if we weren't already dealing with a lot! No water. No internet. No air conditioning. In the wake of the chaos of the storm, we are left in silence, save the generators growling to a start. We know the fear and powerlessness of the disciples tossed around throughout the night. We felt it as the trees bowed to the wind. We experienced it as the lights went out. It was palpable amidst the silence.

Given our recent ordeal and recognition of what Peter and the disciples experienced, perhaps we can understand Peter's action as a result of disorientation, rather than a test of faith. Wouldn't we think that the storm must have done a number on us if we saw Jesus walking through the backyard after the tropical storm?! It must be an apparition! Far from a demand for proof of identity, Peter's call to come out on the water, perhaps, bubbles up from some deep recess in all of our beings: give me indisputable proof that you are God! Who doesn't want that? Oh to have one moment of incontrovertible proof of God and God acting for us in life! Amidst all the questions in life, who wouldn't want just one moment of clarity, surety, confirmation.

Thus, Peter's request, while dangerous once it comes out of his mouth, is, perhaps, one of the most common longings that we all have. What we should take away from this experience, in part, is that even those closest to Jesus--his 12 friends--had no clue about who it was with whom they were

dealing. Especially Peter. Sure, he is the one who confesses Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. Yet, when it comes to trusting in Jesus, the story from today is only one in a long line of failures. Which helps us when we consider our own shortcomings. If we have ever doubted, if we have ever wondered about this practice, if we have ever felt adrift, well, we are in good company. Even those around Jesus experienced such questioning, were not the paragons of faith that they have been made out to be, and possess clay feet just like all of us.

Indeed, today's story can invariably become a contest of what faith consists of, and, unfortunately, who possesses the most faith. The misguided lesson from this moral tale is: don't lose faith like Peter, but believe! Yet, this way of reading the story only leads us to feel like Peter. We begin to sink, and we are threatened to drown in our own inability to trust. And if faith becomes a contest, then there are any number of folks willing to tell us that we are on the wrong track or could do better or need to get with it and believe better!

Yet, a more helpful understanding of faith in this context is not some personal achievement whereby we know intellectually or cognitively some theological construct. Rather, faith in this context is trust that God is present and active--even at times with all evidence to the contrary--and such trust allows us not to be weighed down by fear. For fear grips us and binds us and brings out the very worst in our person. Whereas freedom from fear opens us up, allows us to reach out, and ultimately brings healing and hope into our lives and those around us.

Furthermore, perhaps we need a reimagining of this story. That is, perhaps, the story is less about Peter (and by extension us) and more about Jesus.

There is a famous mind game where you are invited to imagine seeing a man pulling a boat to shore. If you didn't know better and you saw this scene for the very first time, there is another way that you might interpret the image: the man is not pulling the boat to shore, rather the man is pulling the shore to the boat. The same thing may be true with prayer. We often think that we are pulling God close to us. However, prayer is what allows us to be pulled close to God. With regard to faith, we could say that the same misperception exists. We often think of faith as something that we do and possess and need to have in reserve to get to God. In today's story, Peter lacks faith. Yet, another way of thinking of faith is not so much what we possess, but rather what God possesses and what God gives. Trust, hope, grace are not anything that we possess on our own but what God gifts to us, because of God's trust, hope, and grace in and for us.

Indeed, the story for today--Jesus walking on the water--is a verbal icon of this very thing. In the midst of the struggle and fear of the disciples Jesus enters, and in Peter's need, Jesus remains and saves. Thus, the story is not about Peter and his ability to believe and save himself. Rather, the story is about Jesus's faithfulness. Jesus enters into our vulnerabilities and, regardless of our belief or lack thereof, Jesus's willingness to abide, to engage, and to save us. To be sure, there will be those times when we feel overwhelmed, when the storms surge and we are uncertain in the moment and for the future, and we long for proof that God has not abandoned us. It is in those moments--as well as in each moment--that like in the story Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches us.

We may not necessarily feel it. We may not cognitively know it. We may even feel as if we are still in the storm. Though the thing that we cling to is that at a critical level, Jesus is always already present. Our task is to take hold of the hand and to begin to trust that Jesus is faithful now, ever, and always.