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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 14: 22-33

“In or Out?”

I love that the lectionary gives us this story about Jesus walking on water in August when so many of us have recently spent time enjoying some body of water, whether it be a pool, a lake, or the ocean. Many of us have spent time enjoying water this summer – fishing, swimming, cruising. At Spofford we did all of that, plus we went tubing and the kids went knee boarding. But none of us walked on water, at least not in the literal sense of the term. Metaphorically speaking, Charlotte came the closest when she eagerly jumped into the 3 person tube on our first night, sitting in the safety of Tommy’s arms, eager to see what the action was all about . . .Charlotte, mustering the bravery of Peter in our story, was full of courage.

This story about Jesus walking on water, and Peter’s decision to try to copy him, is such a familiar one, and is most often told like this: Peter had the right idea when he got out of the boat, because he literally stepped out in faith. Peter, like all of us, is invited to step out into the storms of life where Jesus calls us to take courage, leave the safety of the boat, and come to him. And if we have enough faith in Jesus and keep our focus firmly on him, we will not sink, despite the wind and the waves around us.

But Peter got distracted, didn’t he? When he got anxious and sidetracked from keeping his focus on Jesus, Peter, whose name means “rock,” went down like a stone.

Walking on water has come to be synonymous, even outside the church, with the idea of stepping out in boldness, taking a risk. If you do an Internet search of “walk on water,” you’ll get links to business consulting firms, fashion companies, science projects – all of them proponents of “thinking outside the box.”

And there’s no doubt in my mind that Jesus wants us to take risks for the sake of the gospel. No doubt Jesus wants us to keep our eyes focused on him and his mission. No doubt Jesus wants us to have the gift of faith. He’s the one who reminded his followers, in Matthew 19:26, “With God, all things are possible.” He’s the one who told some fishermen to leave everything to follow him. He’s the one who tells us to take up our cross, to lose our lives for his sake, that if we have faith even the size of a mustard seed, we could say to that mountain, get up and move, and it would. No doubt, Jesus wants us to take risks, be bold, do outrageous things for the gospel, step out in faith and follow.

But is that really what this particular gospel lesson is about? Maybe it is.

But maybe it’s about something else, about the need to sometimes stay in the boat, and let Jesus do the walking on water.

Maybe when Jesus says to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” the meaning isn’t, “Oh, Peter, if only you had more faith you could have walked on water, too” but is, instead, “Oh, Peter, why did you get out of the boat? Why didn’t you just trust me?”

This summer I’ve been preaching about spiritual practices — saying thank you, forgiving yourself and others, listening, observing the Sabbath – none of which are easy to practice – but trusting God to be God and take care of us when storms swirl around? It sounds easy, and as Christians it’s certainly something we should be able to do – after all, isn’t that what faith is all about? But I have to be honest with you and tell you that I find this practice of trusting God in the storms of life to be one of the harder practices because it tests my faith, and like Peter, I want to walk on water, too.

Unlike other practices, such as prayer, study, solitude, and so forth, the practice of trust is not something we can schedule. We kind of have to wait for situations that would cause us to worry or fear, and in the midst of that situation, choose to believe that we are safe in the arms of God. We have to sail along and wait for a rogue wave or a sudden wind shift, and trust we will not capsize. And I don’t know about you, but if I’m faced with the choice of trusting in someone else that I won’t capsize or taking matters into my own hands, I’ll often choose my own hands before someone else’s. And I don’t think I’m alone. Peter felt the same way.

I can only imagine that when Peter said to Jesus “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you,” Jesus thought to himself, “Are you kidding me? Have you noticed there’s a huge storm raging here?” Maybe when Jesus said to Peter, “OK, come,” he didn’t really expect him to do it. You know when someone says to you, “Come on in, the water’s fine,” you know darn well the water isn’t fine-it’s cold-and the last thing you do is get in the water. Maybe it was that sort of moment between Peter and Jesus, so when Jesus saw Peter actually get in the water, he couldn’t believe his own eyes.

The Sea of Galilee is known for its random weather. Like little Spofford Lake, it has these massive storms that suddenly blow in at the end of a relatively mild and cloudless day. These types of storms catch you off guard. One minute you’re on the lake enjoying the day, and the next thing you know rain is pelting you on your way home. The disciples were caught-off guard by the storm, which goes on all night long. And for them, there was no rescue in sight. No captain to shout words of reassurance. I wonder what they were thinking. Were they wondering, is this it? Is this the end for us?

A lot of people don’t this, but Matthew, in this story, has just described for us the situation of the early church. The early followers of Jesus were in a situation similar to the disciples’ situation. They were alone, theological storms were raging around them, and they began to think maybe it was best to jump ship.

In this story, Matthew likens the church to a boat that is in the middle of a lake, far from land, being battered by waves. Matthew is telling us how the church suffered in the early years, that time when Jesus’ followers were going forth to spread the good news, and not

everyone thought it was good. The stormy winds of conflict and persecution surrounded them, and there was no captain to shout words of reassurance.

Except, in the latest, darkest part of the night, literally, the “fourth watch” (which would be between 3:00 and 6:00 AM), there he is. He’s walking out to save them because he knows they’re in danger. But when they see him, they don’t recognize him. They think he’s a ghost. But Jesus immediately said to them, “Take courage, it is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Well, apparently that was reassurance enough for everyone but Peter, who proceeds to say to Jesus, “If it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Now, we’ve heard those words before; Jesus has heard those words before. “If it is you . . .”

Satan used those words to tempt Jesus in the wilderness. If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread, Satan said to Jesus. Peter gives Jesus the same sort of test. “If you are God, tell me to come to you on the water,” i.e. make me walk on water, too.

And at first Peter did walk, but then he started to sink.

There are plenty of people who say Peter sank because he took his eyes off Jesus, but I think the reason Peter sank was because his eyes were never on Jesus in the first place. If they had been, he wouldn’t have seen the need for Jesus to prove himself. He would have stayed in the boat with the other disciples and trusted Jesus to save them. He would have taken Jesus at his word.

The stated clerk of our denomination, Gradye Parsons, used to preach from this text a lot. And when he did, he reminded the church—all of us, that yes, the church is like a boat, and we are all in this boat together. In times of stress and trial, it is tempting to want to jump out of the boat, and to put Jesus to the test. But, as Gradye liked to remind us, “Stay in the boat. Row across the lake. There will be a storm. You will not die.”

It’s good advice for the church in the 21st century, but it’s also good advice for us as individuals, too.

When we are afraid and we wondering what the future holds, our greatest hope is to be in the boat, trust Christ, and let him do the walking on water. When we are afraid, and the storms of life rage around us, the gospel message insists: Stay in the boat; this is no time to get out of it. God is with you. Keep your eyes on God, instead of focusing on the storm. Trust your Savior.

Which I realize is a very difficult thing to do. It is so easy to get distracted, worried, even overwhelmed at times by the waves all around us. Economic, political, social, medical -- we can find things to worry about just about anywhere. But try to remember at times like this, that even if you take your eyes off Jesus, Jesus is there to grab you. When Peter

takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to sink "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him." It's right there in verse 31.

Should Peter have stayed in the boat in the first place? I think so. But if in life you happen to get out of the boat, which let's face it, all of us will at some point falter, or even fail, Jesus will be there to grab us, to catch us, to support us and set us up straight again, ready to give it another go.

So trust. Trust your Savior, for it is a life-saving practice.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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