

Proper 14A 08
Matthew 14:22-33

There's a very old joke about a priest, a minister, and a rabbi fishing in the middle of a lake. They've been out long enough that they've run out of cold beer. So the priest says, "Not to worry, I'll go get some right now." And he steps out of the boat, walks across the water to the shore, gets another six-pack and walks back into the boat. The minister doesn't pay much attention but the rabbi is dumbfounded. "Do you see what he's doing?" the rabbi says to the minister. And the minister responds with, "You bet. I'm glad he volunteered to go back - I think I have a nibble on my hook..." A little while later, the minister says, "We've just run out of bait - I'll go back to shore and get more." And he steps out of the boat, walks across the water, and returns shortly with another bucket of bait. Well, again, the rabbi is just dumbfounded. Is this a Christian thing? Surely God would make it possible for one of his Chosen people to also walk on water. The rabbi thinks about this for a while, and then says to his buddies, "How about if I go back and get some sandwiches?" They look at each other and look at him and say, "Great idea!" So the rabbi stands up, steps out of the boat, and promptly sinks in the lake. The minister looks at the priest and says, "We probably should have told him about the rocks."

Definitely an old joke, but a good contemporary follow up to this morning's Gospel reading. When we find ourselves in the midst of a storm, do we trust Jesus enough to walk with us through the storm? Do we become paralyzed and know not what to do? Do we forget about Jesus and depend on only those visible and sure rocks to get us out of the storm? Do we depend only on ourselves? Where do we place our trust?

It's not easy trusting in someone we can't see - someone we know only through reading and oral history. We hear testimony of people who tell us they wouldn't be alive or they wouldn't be where they're at if it weren't for their faith in God, their faith in Jesus, their faith in the Holy Spirit. Are we one of those people? Or do we respond with a nod, a smile, and a "whatever floats your boat"? What does it mean to trust in Christ so much that you place your life in his hands - just as Peter did when he stepped out of the boat and into the rough and stormy sea? Peter wanted to believe - he wanted to be the good little disciple - but he wasn't quite ready yet to really turn his life over to Jesus. So he walked a few steps but then got scared that maybe Jesus couldn't really do anything. So he sank. And Jesus pulled him up and out of the water. It really was one of those no-atheists-in-a-foxhole moments. If there's nothing or no one left to save us, we'll probably cry out to God in our last-ditch plea - just in case there really is a God. Or a Jesus Christ. Or a Holy Spirit. Just in case.

How do we each really experience Jesus Christ? How can we have that moment when we have no doubts and place our faith solely in the strength, the wisdom, the guidance of God?

Of course, we each have different experiences with Christ - we each have faith in God in different ways and different degrees. No two of us are alike when it comes to where we are on our spiritual journeys. Some of us don't even know that we're already on the road; others of us keep taking the wrong exit ramp; some of us walk alone, insisting that the only person we can trust is ourself; and still others of us rely on Christ as our own little GPS. (Those little Global

Positioning Systems that depend on up to 32 satellites to tell us where we are and how to get where we're going.)

It's not easy being open to the possibility that at some point in a storm, we can give our lives over to Jesus. If we can't do it in calm weather, why would we think anything would be different in a storm? But sometimes that's what it takes for us to make that leap of faith - a personal storm that appears to have no way out. When we finally reach out for help, we receive a life-giving, life-saving response. That's what happened to Peter. His doubt dragged him down, but he knew enough to cry for help, and Jesus pulled him out of the choppy sea and back into the safety of the boat. It was only then that he could say, "Truly you are the Son of God." Only then. And even after that incident, he still had difficulties being consistent in his faith in Jesus. We know that Peter was a doubter and denier. Jesus knew him far better than Peter knew himself. Jesus knew what was in Peter's heart.

Peter is not unlike so many of us. Afraid to trust in God - what if there really is no God? On the other hand, what if God really is? Peter still had difficulty claiming the hard parts about having faith in Jesus - the mocking and abuse that was visited on Jesus and his followers. Many of us don't like to publicly claim our discipleship in Jesus - what if people think we're one of those happy-clappy born-again? Who really takes them seriously? Instead, we say very little.

Our acceptance of Christ in our lives is often limited and often conditional. I'll claim my identity as a Christian as long as I don't have to disrupt the rest of my life. Or as long as I don't have to say anything in public. Or as long as you don't expect me to depend on Jesus for a good job, a good school, a nice home, a happy family, a loving and peace-filled marriage... We can all fill in the blank. If we were to think about the various situations in our lives today, what little or big storms would we like to hand over to Jesus - even in the midst of our doubts and disbelief. What would we like to give to Jesus and ask for his outstretched hand to pull us out of the turmoil? What would we ask him to do? Would we ask him to get us through a situation in a way that is loving and merciful and just? What is that situation in which we need that special, divine, outstretched hand of our Savior? It doesn't even have to be a major issue; it might be something as simple as asking Jesus to be with us as we travel or as we try to screw up the courage to talk with someone we don't know or hardly know at coffee hour this morning. Or it might be a terminal illness or a shaky marriage.

Think about that situation and reach out to Jesus, reach out to God, reach out to the Holy Spirit. Knock, ask, seek, and we will receive the strong arm of God to lean on, to hold us up, to keep us steady. The situation may not go away but we won't be alone as we move through it. We will not sink. But if we don't reach out, we will be alone and we will go under. That is our choice.

It is our faith in Jesus that continues to provide us with the way to safety through big and little storms. But the bottom line is that we have to risk stepping out of the boat and trust that Jesus will be there to catch us. Because he will catch us. Of that we can be sure.

Amen.

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