

Abundant Life
Pentecost 13
August 10, 2008
Matthew 14: 22-33

Faith and Fear

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Have you ever heard the line, "The safest place to be in the world is inside the will of God"? It's a comforting line. Truth be told, at least part of the reason that you and I are Christians is that the world is a challenging place, full of obstacles and storms, and we want to be safe. We need all the comfort and security that we can get. It's no accident that Christian worship spaces are called "sanctuaries." And did you know that many traditional sanctuaries are designed to look like a ship, precisely because of biblical passages like today's text from Matthew and the story of Jesus calming the storm from Matthew 8? If you look up at the ceiling in many worship spaces, you will see exposed beams, intentionally designed to remind the worshipper of the underside of a boat. In fact, in church parlance the place where the congregation sits during worship is called the Nave, which is Latin for "boat" from which we get English words like "Navy" and "Navigate." The point is that as believers, we yearn for words and images that make us feel safe and secure.

Ironically, today's story from Matthew 14 is about anything but safety and security. This passage follows directly on the heels of last week's story, the feeding of the 5,000. Some of you will remember that Jesus began that story by trying to get away by himself to pray, but his plan was interrupted by the hungry crowd. As evening continues into night in today's text, our Lord is determined to get away. He sends his disciples out into a boat on the Sea of Galilee, while he stays on shore for a little quality time with the Father. Before

long, one of those violent storms that Lake Galilee is famous for whips up, and Jesus' friends are in the fight of their lives. It's true that several of them are professional fishermen who have been caught in unexpected storms before, but no one knows better than they that the beautiful Sea is also a widow-maker. The disciples' hands are raw from trying to hold onto the sails and their stomachs are queasy being bounced about in the waves. It has been a long night with Mother Nature, and now, just when they are exhausted from the battle, some ghost comes walking toward them on the water. This is the last thing that they need! But Peter's instincts tell him that this is no spooky apparition. He calls to the shadowy figure out on the waves and says, "Jesus, if it's you, command me to come out there on the water with you." How interesting that Peter does not ask Jesus to prove himself by calming the storm, the way that the Lord did once before. Wouldn't that be the obvious request when you're afraid that you're about to sleep with the fish at any moment?! But instead, the number one disciple has a great moment of faith-insight here. He asks the unknown figure to call him to walk on water because he realizes that's exactly the kind of thing that God would do. Contrary to our human desire to be wrapped in bubble-wrap and insulated from all the dangers of the world, Jesus is constantly asking you and me to take risks, to leave our comfort zones and join the great adventure, to abandon the relative safety of the boat and start high-stepping it on the Sea alongside him. Ours is a risk-taking God.

Jesus does call, and Peter willingly jumps into the drink. Historically, preachers of this text have tended to emphasize that before long Peter starts to sink, but I, for one, want to underline the fact that for two, three or four steps, this disciple actually walks on water! How cool is that?! It turns out that this mere mortal nicknamed "The Rock" can float after all! His is an incredible of faith and courage. Peter ignores the laws of gravity and the laws of physics and walks as a person of faith, even though he knows that what he is doing is

absolutely impossible for him. This story is also living proof of just how much Jesus thinks of our so-called meager abilities. If only you and I had as much confidence in ourselves as God has in us.

First it was a hardware store, built in 1947, then a run-down storage building. Now it's a grace place. A Colorado congregation spotted this old store on the main street of their small town, and immediately recognized that it had incredible missional ministry potential. They were anxious to reach their neighbors, especially those disconnected from God and the church, so they sold their traditional church building and pounced on this building as an ideal location for a café, bookstore, and worship space. They turned the store into a commercial restaurant called "The Lighthouse Café," an eatery that is now open to the public six days a week, with specialty coffees, pastries, sandwiches, and soups. The café builds a bridge to the community by bringing people into the building for breakfasts, lunches, and community events. It establishes relationships, breaks down barriers, and makes it easier for neighbors to come to the church for other events. The café also stimulates community-building within the congregation. People worship during one service and eat during the other, or they stop in for breakfast before worship or for lunch a bit later. People have a hunger – for food and for a relationship with God – and The Lighthouse Café helps satisfy them both.

Talk about a congregation with the courage to walk on water! Can you imagine what it must have been like to be in the meetings this church had as they decided to leave behind their traditional pews and pipe organ to become the church that sells club sandwiches and claim chowder? It's incredible to think about. But some Christians actually do things like this. They let go of their perceptions of what the church is supposed to be. They let their

own personal preferences take a back seat to what they believe God wants, and they take crazy risks in an effort to follow a God on a mission.

Now, I am the first to admit that congregations with this kind of faith are rare, just as I must also admit that after a few steps, Peter does, in fact, begin to sink into the Sea. We typically say that the reason that could no longer walk on water is because he doubted, but I think that it's a lot simpler than that. I think that this disciple looked around at the storm all around him and gets scared, the way that most of us would in the same situation. My point is that the contrast here is not between faith and doubt, but between faith and fear. Many of us have been taught that having doubts about our faith is a sin, but God doesn't get mad when you and I doubt. Doubting means that we are wrestling, struggling with important truths. It means that we are trying to dig into God's Word and put it together in a way that makes sense for our lives. Doubt is an important part of any living faith.

Fear, on the other hand, is the acid of the Christian Life. Its corrosive effects eat away at our trust in God and ourselves. Fear is what keeps us in the boat. Here's a scary truth. Most churches would rather die than change. My first call was a small congregation of mostly older members in rural Ohio. We had about 70 people in worship, and we were doing our best to hang on, but it turned out that there was another Lutheran Church just a mile down the same road with the same name, and compared to them we were a mega-church. That St. John Lutheran Church had just twelve members, a building, and a cemetery. Of course, they could not afford a permanent pastor, so they just hired preachers to come in week after week and lead worship for them. At one time the two congregations had been one, but somewhere decades in the past, for reasons that no one could remember, there was a church fight, and this little group split off. I had been warned that better people than me had tried to bring the two congregations back together, but being

young and foolish, I had to try. It seemed so obvious to me that by joining us, that now tiny group of Lutherans would at least have access to Bible study, fellowship, and pastoral care, and our St. John's could certainly benefit from a dozen more people in worship, but when I went down the road, I was turned down flat. Those people did not want to hear any proposals that involved change. They were happy just the way they were, thank you!

Most of us react to change in exactly the same way. We're scared to death of anything new or different. That's why it's so important to start new congregations that focus on reaching unchurched people, because it's almost impossible to change an inwardly focused church culture where good people have been doing things the same way for as far back as anyone can remember. Unfortunately, faith-eating fear is not just back there and back then. Some of you will remember last April when Pastors Gary and Nancy Christensen came to do an evangelism workshop with us, and when it was over, they asked us to go out with them and knock on a few doors, just to introduce the church to our neighbors. Everyone politely refused. Now, I don't want to offend anyone, but it was fear that motivated that decision, fear of what might be behind those doors, fear of what people might think of you if you knocked on their door, and I understand that fear—believe me, I do—because I often feel afraid. But I also know that fear inhibits boldness; it sidetracks missional thinking; fear pushes us toward selfishness and away from generosity; it leads us to practice politics of scarcity, rather than a theology of abundance. It keeps us from being the people that we might become. Fear is what causes us to sink.

And there is plenty to be afraid of in this world. I am the first to tell you that following Jesus in a radical way has consequences, and sometimes those consequences hurt, but please notice that this great story ends with Jesus grabbing hold of Peter and pulling him to safety. Regardless of whether the student is faithful or fearful, the Master reaches in and

catches him. God's love for us is never dependent on how much courage we have, but our lives with God will be richer if we have that courage. Peter Gomes, the Chaplain at Harvard University, says that we need to have a buoyant faith, the kind of faith that keeps us afloat, even in the midst of the storms because when you and I have a faith like that, we, too can walk on water. Jesus knows it, and so do you.

Amen