

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 10, 2014
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jonah 2:1-9
Psalm 29
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:22-33

Last week our Gospel lesson focused on Jesus' miraculous feeding of thousands on a hillside with only five loaves and two fish. In so doing, Jesus taught the disciples (and by implication the Church) that if we will follow where the Gospel leads us (by faith), the ministry we are called to *will* get done. How it gets done is not always susceptible to air-tight analysis, but in the gracious economy of God, there is always enough.

Today's Gospel lesson finds Jesus forcing the disciples into a boat, and heading off to do what he had planned to do prior to this event, namely, retreat into the hills and be alone with God.

During the evening, as the disciples are in the boat, a violent storm arises and great fear seizes them. They are afraid not merely because of the storm, but also because in the ancient near east, the sea was seen as the domain of chaos and evil, ruled by capricious gods and evil forces. It was believed to be inhabited by monsters and devils. To the people of that time, great fear was often associated with the sea.

So when Jesus comes to them in the pitch black darkness of the middle of the night, walking on the water, their fear is elevated to disastrous levels. They think he is a ghost.

But upon hearing Jesus speak to them and reassure them, Peter asks to go to Jesus. He steps out of the boat, and -- momentarily -- walks on the water. Then he falls. Jesus lifts him up, the storm subsides, and the disciples worship.

Now I can remember hearing a few sermons on this story, and perhaps you can too. And the conventional wisdom and interpretation I've often heard regarding Peter in this situation is this: Peter is being his brash, impulsive, impetuous self. He acts before he thinks through the consequences of his actions, and then finds himself in trouble. And in this situation Peter becomes fodder for many preachers who conclude: "this is what happens when you take your eyes off Jesus."

And no doubt there is probably much truth in this.

There is just one problem. I don't think Peter is the "bad guy" here. True, Jesus says to him in verse 31: "you don't have much faith; why did you doubt me?"

But that statement sent me to thinking this week: If Jesus criticizes Peter here for a lack of faith, *what would a faithful response look like in this situation?* If this was the *absence* of faith, what would the *presence* of faith look like here?

And it seems to me that the faithful response to Jesus here looks exactly like what Peter does – *he steps out from where he is and moves right into the chaos toward Jesus*. It seems to me that a person cannot do something like this without exercising at least a fair measure of faith.

So I have a question for you: What if Peter represents something positive here? What if Peter is not to be reduced to a moralistic sermon where the preacher scolds us with the familiar: “This is what happens when you take your eyes off of Jesus!”?

What if Peter represents the only disciple in the boat who is beginning to “get it?”

What if Peter is beginning to understand that, with God’s power in our lives, we *can* begin to do what God does. What if Peter is starting to see that we *can* step out in faith and look beyond our conventional limitations?

Remember, it has only been a few hours ago that Peter and the others witnessed thousands of people (including themselves!) fed with only five loaves of bread and two fish. Maybe, thinks Peter to himself, all things *are* possible with God.

I can be so easy for us to chide Peter because of his doubt, to moralize this story down into oversimplified, black-and-white polarities where immature disciples doubt Jesus and mature disciples do not.

This is a mistake, I think. It's a mistake because I don't believe doubt is the real culprit here. I realize that Jesus' rebuke of Peter implies such (v. 31: "Why did you doubt me?"). But I suspect that the real culprit here is *fear*, not doubt.

If you look carefully, the entire tone of this passage is one of great fear. But in addition, the language Matthew uses here is language consistent of *believers* throughout the Gospel, not unbelievers. It's as though Matthew is writing to persons who have faith, but who become *afraid* to draw on it when they need it the most. Fear -- not doubt -- is the heart of their struggle.

We can understand this, because many times it is fear, more than doubt, that robs *us* of faith. We become susceptible to the gut-wrenching sense that nothing or no one is dependable, that we are not safe, that danger and destruction lie just around the corner. (Cf. Jonah 2)

The Good News of course is that Jesus does not abandon us in our fears. He comes to us, and he rescues us.

But this applies on more than a personal level. For in the long history of the Church, the boat has often been seen as an image of the Church as she floats in the turbulent waters of secular culture. And the waters of this world in which the Church lives and ministers are not always benign. In fact, they may at times threaten the Church and tempt her to great fear.

And this is perhaps where the real Good News for today is found. For among other things Matthew reminds us that the Church is still securely held in Jesus' loving hands. In the midst of opposition, perilous circumstances, scandal and a host of other hostile forces, Jesus comes to his Church and will not let her be defeated.

Martin Luther was right: "And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us; we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. Jesus has bled and died for his Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The great artist Van Gogh painted a painting entitled "First Steps." It shows a small girl at one end of the garden, held up on wobbling legs by her patient mother. In the front left part of the painting is daddy, kneeling next to his wheelbarrow with eager arms outstretched. The child is just beginning to move toward those open arms, taking the enormous risk of stepping out on her own and believing that if she just keeps her eyes on daddy, she will defy the odds, she will do what she has never done before, and she will make it.

Brothers and sisters, if we can have faith to follow the Gospel where it leads us, this congregation can also defy the odds and do the impossible, even when times are tough and the storms of opposition are severe.

As we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to come with faith. But in addition, bring your fears with you as well. As you open your hands, release those fears, and receive His grace. Give those fears to him, and exchange them for his peace.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.