

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 13, 2017
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

Our Gospel lesson this morning is probably rather familiar to most of us, and this familiarity is precisely what can make it difficult for us to hear it authentically. It may be that we have heard sermons based on this text before, perhaps many sermons. I suspect that the typical theme in most of those sermons would be something like this:

Bold and impetuous Peter asks to come out of the boat to accompany Jesus among the waves. He steps out onto the water, and as he does he glances away from Jesus for a split second where he sees the strength of the sea. He then begins to sink, and calls out for Jesus to save him.

The theme of sermons in this vein then becomes clear: *Keep your eyes on Jesus*. And preachers far and wide (including myself) have sounded this theme like a drum sounding the rhythm of a relentless march. *Keep your eyes on Jesus*. Focus on the Lord. The more serious your troubles, the more steadfastly you should focus on Jesus. *Keep your eyes on Jesus*. Don't let your circumstances lead you to doubt and fear. *Keep your eyes on Jesus*.

Now as sermon themes go, this is not entirely bad, I suppose. And there is probably some textual evidence for it here.

But the problem many of us have here isn't that we don't *know* we should trust Jesus. We know that full well. We learned that lesson a long time ago. The problem for me (at least) is often one of *fear*, not *doubt*. *I have faith, but sometimes in life I become afraid to draw on that faith when I need it most.*

Circumstances in my life and in the world constantly tempt me to become afraid. Things in the economy; things in the politics of our land; circumstances at work, or at home, or health concerns; money and financial problems. On and on it goes.

And while *I know* that I should trust these things to the Lord, sometimes I find myself gripped with fear. Perhaps you feel this way also from time to time.

I readily admit to you this morning that telling you to "keep your eyes on Jesus" is good advice. It's very good advice. But there is a huge difference between *good advice* and the *Gospel*. Good advice tends to put the burden or the onus on us, and what we must do. The Gospel, on the other hand, shows us what *God* is doing. I want some Gospel this morning, and I think there is some in this text if we look closely at it.

When Peter begins to sink, and cries out to Jesus, what does Jesus do? We are told in verse 31: "Instantly Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him."

When I was a kid, my older brothers Kent and Rod often tortured me and played tricks on me. And on rare occasions, I would return the favor. I don't remember what I did, but on one occasion I did something to my brother Rod that made him so angry that I knew I had to go into hiding. He was so mad that I was convinced that my physical safety was in danger!

Our big two story house had many places to hide. But I needed a place Rod would not look. So I went into the bathroom, and there was a cabinet there with a small door on it. My mom kept cleaning supplies and things in there. It was small, too small for a kid to fit into, which made it a good choice.

I scrunched myself together and squeezed into the small space, pulling the door closed. As I waited there, curled up like a little ball, what I didn't realize was that there was nothing supporting my weight in that little space. I had crawled into a space where only a thin piece of plywood separated me from the basement below.

Within seconds, the plywood gave way, and whoosh -- I was flying downward! In the whirl of movement, I saw a pipe out of the corner of my eye. I reached up and grabbed it just in time, stopping my free fall. I screamed, "Help!"

My stepfather was working in the basement, and I remember him saying how surprised he was when he heard a noise and looked up to see a pair of skinny

legs hanging from a hole in the floor above. He grabbed me and put me down, and I had to explain what had happened.

I wonder if Peter had a similar feeling when Jesus rescued him. In a split second he was going down, going under, but Jesus reached out and lifted him up. And at that moment he didn't need to be told to "look to Jesus" or to "keep his eyes on Jesus." *What else could he do?* And Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.

Do you see the Good News here? Yes, Peter should have kept his eyes on Jesus. And so should we. *But when we don't, when we falter, and even when we fail, Jesus is there to grab us, to catch us, to support us and to help us stand up straight again.*

Good advice is wonderful. The admonition to "Keep our eyes on Jesus" is excellent advice, and we should heed it. But good advice and the Gospel are not the same thing. Jesus wants to be more to us than a life coach or a guide. He wants to be our *Savior*, One who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The Jesus in this story wants to do more than just command our attention; he wants to save our lives.

By all means, keep your eyes on Jesus. Look constantly to him. *But in those moments when you falter and fail, you will feel the presence of a strong hand lifting you up again, setting your feet back on solid ground.* At times it may not be

just the hand of Jesus, but the additional hands of the Body of Christ, lifting and loving you by their presence as well.

So come with faith today to meet him at his table. Reach out and take the grace he offers you through the bread and the wine. And give thanks that he is able to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. That's why it's called the Gospel of Jesus Christ and not the "good advice" of Jesus Christ.

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