

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost-Year A

Psalm 85:8-13; Matthew 14:22-33

“Saved by....doubt?!”

August 7, 2011

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church

Dearest brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace be with you all.

We are encountering a powerful gospel reading today of the disciples in boat on dangerous waters, Jesus walking on the water and Peter's attempt to do so. It's a reading that is familiar to many and with that familiarity there is the notion that begs for something different. This morning, let's do something different. Rather than look at Jesus, let's look at Peter. Rather than focus on faith, let's focus on doubt. One man, one element of life that together can, of all things, draw us closer to God and to each other.

Today's gospel reading about Peter's brief walk on the water appears only in the gospel of Matthew. Mark includes the story of Jesus coming across the sea and calming the storm. John uses a shorter version of it and Luke leaves it out altogether. These three gospels agree that this story followed the feeding of the 5,000. They also agree that Jesus' calming of the storm was a miracle worked **only** for the disciples. It's a very unusual occurrence in Jesus' ministry.

In this story, Matthew is deliberate in bringing the disciples from observers to participants in an act of God. Unlike other ministry acts such as watching a healing or handing out bread to the hungry...here the disciple's are front and center. Their livelihood is threatened and there is an element of risk, fear, uncertainty.

To take it a step further, Matthew specifically focuses on Peter. Why Peter? Who is Peter?

Peter...he's an appealing figure. He's the brash, passionate disciple who is always rushing into things, saying what others are thinking, and doing what others would never dare to do. Peter is Jesus' first disciple, and clearly one of his favorites since Jesus, in Matthew 16, calls Peter the foundation rock of the church.

It's Peter who asks Jesus to explain his parables. Peter acts like the know it all kids who always hand his/her hand raised first to answer a teacher's questions since he answers Jesus' questions first. Peter who understands Jesus' true identity but fails to understand what it will cost him.

As Christ's death looms on the horizon, Peter swears he'll never deny Jesus and he does...three times.

It is Peter whom Jesus asks to pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane...and Peter falls asleep.

And it today's story, it is Peter who Jesus calls to walk with him upon the water in an act of faith and trust. Peter does so...then he sinks.

Over and over again, he is the disciple who takes risks, who makes great leaps of faith and often stumbles but keeps brushing himself off and getting up to try again.

Do you know of someone who has a personality like Peter? Such people are hard not to adore. They talk a better game than they play, but there is an underlying sincerity in everything they do. Peter is full of faith and confidence one minute, and doubt and uncertainty the next. Through all the ups and downs, his heart is on his sleeve. He dances to his own music, so to speak. That's what makes it easy to adore such individuals since they are not fake, they are genuine. What you see is what you get.

Perhaps that's why Matthew likes him.

At the beginning of today's reading, Peter is just one of the crowd. Like the other disciples, he's likely tired after the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus has sent the disciples ahead of him and has gone by himself into the mountains to pray. By nightfall, Jesus is still praying and the disciples have their hands full, trying to keep their boat afloat amid high winds and higher waves.

They're soaked, teeth chattering, blisters on their hands...when Jesus comes to them. Matthew says it is around 3 in the morning. They're all searching for land in whatever moonlight that shines and then some spots a shadowy figure walking toward them on the rough water.

One of them says, "It's a ghost!" and immediately the ghost says to them, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."

I'm sure the voice was hard to hear amidst the wind or he was too far away because Peter doesn't trust him. Peter's the first to speak, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water."

Let's take a commercial break.

If you were Peter, would that be your first response on the stormy sea?

Why not, "Lord, if it really is you, tell us what we had for dinner tonight." Or, "Lord, if it is you, make this storm stop right now!" Neither is that the test from Peter.

"Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water."

Let me come to where you are on the water. Show me what you can do, what I can do, if only you tell me to. Take away my doubt. Make me have faith.

"Come." Jesus says.

Peter swings his legs over the side of the boat, while the others are watching in shock, hearts beating rapidly. The waves are crashing into him and the boat is rocking, the wind is blowing his wet hair into his eyes.

He puts his bare feet flat on the water; takes a huge, trembling breath, and stands.

He takes a few hesitant steps toward Jesus...like the first steps he ever took in his life...slow, cautious, shaky.

"But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

We've all felt like Peter. You began to ride a bicycle and your confidence grew, you wanted to go faster as the trees whipped by you. Then you suddenly lost your confidence, reality set in, you dropped one foot and you hit the ground.

Or, you're going along in the routine of life until you experience something, directly or indirectly, that compromises your well-being.

"Lord, save me!"

Jesus does, reaching out his hand to catch him, pulling him out of the water, dragging him over to where the disciples can pull him back into the boat.

Then awful words are spoken, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Those are words that we do not want to hear but they are words many of us ask ourselves every day. Why don't I have more faith? Why can't I trust God? Why am I afraid to let go and let God take care of me?

I believe I'm in God's hands and then I lose my job. Recent numbers state that 13.9 million Americans are looking for work which may increase with the growing uncertainty in our economy. The interviews go by, my savings disappear along with my faith and I begin to sink.

I believe God is active in the world...but the newspaper headlines, crime statistics, and growing poverty make for a powerful storm to overcome.

I believe in life after death, but then a friend of mine gets sick and the doctor says he has six, maybe nine months to live. I pray for a miracle but no miracle comes. I pray to hear the reassuring voice of God but no voice comes. The waves begin to crash, and I begin to sink.

Why do we doubt? Because we are afraid. The sea of life is vast, the storms of life are powerful, and we feel so small, so powerless, so vulnerable.

We doubt even when we have faith. We have a little faith like Peter but it does not seem to save us.

Like Peter, we try to walk with Jesus, but we fail. Our intentions are great but we sink.

We cry out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus gives us his hand and asks, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Hearing this, we can feel like failures. But here's the twist, here's the good news...can you imagine the story any other way?

What if Peter had not sunk? What if he started to walk, then ran towards Jesus? Does a little slip and slide on the surface of the sea? The disciples join in without hesitation and dance in awe-struck celebration as lightning lights the sky and the wind howls?

It would be a better story. But it wouldn't be a story about us.

The truth is...we're complicated.

The truth is...we obey and fear, we walk and sink, we believe and doubt. We do both. Our faith and doubts exist together. The buoy us up and bear us down, giving us courage while feeding our fears.

This is why we need Jesus. Our fears and doubts may cause us to sink...but they are also what make us cry out for his saving touch. So, how can they be all bad?

Since if we never sank, if we could walk on the waters of life all by ourselves...we wouldn't need a savior.

Our doubts, our fears...remind us who we are, whose we are, and who we need in our lives to save us and give us life.

When we sink, God responds first with grace...then a question of judgment, 'Why did you doubt?'...but never with rejection.

Christ returns us to the boat. We are in the boat because we believe, want to believe even more, and follow Christ as we live.

He returns us to the boat where other believers pull us in to safety. All at once the wind ceases, the waves stop, and in the silence of that once chaotic night...as the sun begins to rise on the horizon...all of us in the boat worship him saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God." Amen.