

Sermon for Sunday – August 13, 2017  
Matthew 14:22-33 – Jesus walks on Water

**Prayer:** May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our strength and our Redeemer.

Out of the three Gospel writers who tell the story about Jesus coming across the sea and calming the storm, only Matthew mentions Peter, which is why Matthew's version is my favorite. There is something so appealing about Peter; the brash, passionate disciple who is always rushing into things, saying what the others are only thinking and doing what the others would not dare to do. *///* Peter is Jesus' first disciple, and it would seem his favorite. When Jesus hikes to the Mount of the Transfiguration later on in Matthew, *Peter* is one, of the three disciples whom he asks to go with him, and while the other two are dumbfounded by the sight of Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, it is Peter who blurts out, "Lord, if you wish, I will make three booths here one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah". A rather odd thing to say! But it is a very human thing to say.

It is Peter who asks Jesus to explain his parables, Peter who answers Jesus question first, Peter who understands Jesus' true identity but fails to understand what it will cost him and Peter whom Jesus calls the foundation rock of the church, just moments before he also calls him Satan.

It is Peter who swears he will never deny Jesus , and Peter who does; it is Peter whom Jesus asks to pray with him in the garden of Gethsemane, and Peter who falls asleep. And in today's story it is Peter whom Jesus calls to walk with him upon the water, and Peter who sinks. Over and over and over again, he is the disciple who takes risks, who makes great leaps of faith and stumbles as often as not but who keeps brushing himself off and getting up to try, try again.

It is hard not to love Peter. Sure, he is one of those enthusiastic types who talk a better game than they play, but still there is something so sincere about him, and so achingly familiar. He is full of faith one minute and full of doubt the next, riding high on his confidence in Jesus one moment and lying in the dirt the next. Through all his ups and downs, all his great moments and his awful ones, Peter's heart is on his sleeve. What you see is what you get with him; an impetuous, outspoken man who both loves Jesus and lets him down, who richly deserves Jesus' judgement but who also receives his grace.

No wonder Matthew likes him – I like him too. At the beginning of today's story, Peter is just one of the crowd. Weary after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus has sent his disciples on ahead of him and has gone by himself into the mountains to pray. By nightfall, he is still praying, while out on the sea his disciples have their hands full, trying to steer their little boat right into a high wind and even higher waves.

They are all, presumably, soaked, their teeth chattering and their hands blistered from their efforts, when Jesus comes to them. It is around three in the morning, Matthew says. No one can sleep, even if he wanted to. They are all watching the horizon, looking for land, measuring the distance they have come against the distance

they still have to go when someone spots a shadowy figure walking toward them across the raging water.

“It’s a ghost! Someone cries, but immediately the ghost speaks to them, saying, “Take heart, it is I; have no fear.” His voice must sound strange to them, or perhaps he is still too far away to see, because Peter does not trust him. Scared to death, putting into words what the others hardly dare think, Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.”

Now that seems to me to be a strange thing to say. Why not say, “Lord, if it is you, tell us what we all had for supper last night,” or Lord, if it is you, make this storm stop. But neither of those is the text that Peter proposes. “Lord, he says, “if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” Bid me come to where you are; let me join you on the water. Take away my doubt. Make me have faith.

“Come,” Jesus says, so Peter swings his legs over the side of the boat and, while all the other disciples watch with their hearts beating in their mouths, he place his feet on the surface of the water – The waves crashing against the side of the boat the wind whipping his hair into his eyes – he puts his feet flat on top of the water, takes a huge, trembling breath, and stands. Then he takes a few hesitant steps toward Jesus across the bubbling surface, like the first steps he ever took in his life, and he gets scared, he doubts and then he feels his feet sinking into the black waves below, and he goes down like a stone.

Even if you have never tried to walk on water, you know how he felt. We have all bravely stepped into the unknown sure we can handle it and then we find ourselves out there – we get scared, we doubt, we sink.

“Lord, save me,” Peter cries out, and Jesus does, reaching out his hand and catching him, hauling him out of the cold water like a big, frightened fish and dragging him over to where the other disciples can pull him back into the boat. And then the awful words; “O man of little faith,” Jesus says to Peter, “why did you doubt?”

They are the words none of us ever want to hear addressed to us, and yet they are the same words many of us ask ourselves every day. Why don’t I have more faith? Why am I afraid to step out of my comfort zone to help others? Why do I doubt? Why can’t I trust that God is present when the waters of life are pleasant and calm and when the waters are difficult and all stirred up. I believe I am in God’s hands and that they are good hands, but then something goes terrible wrong and I cannot find my faith and I begin to sink.

Why do we doubt? Why? Because we are afraid, because the sea is so vast and we are so small, because the storm is so powerful and we are so easily sunk, because life is so beyond our control. Why do we doubt? Because we are afraid – heck we are afraid even when we do have faith. Because we do have faith. It might not feel like enough sometimes but we do have some. Like Peter, we have a little, and a little is better than nothing, even though there are times when it does not seem enough to save us.

Like Peter, we have faith and we doubt, we try to walk with Jesus and we fail, we take a few steps and we sink, we cry out “Lord save me, and somehow Jesus does.

Like Peter we sink, but our God reaches out and catches us, responding with Grace and perhaps some words of correction but never with rejection. God returns us

to the boat, knowing full well that the only reason we are in the boat in the first place is because we believe, or want to believe, and because we mean to follow him through all our doubtful days.

Somehow God returns us to the boat, where our companions grab us by the scruff of the neck and haul us aboard, where we fall grateful and exhausted onto the slippery deck. All at once the wind ceases, and the waves hush, and in the awesome silence our night becomes day.

So friends – I don't know about you but tonight I will once again say my prayer ask for forgiveness for all my doubts and fears and then I will give thanks for God's grace – and I will sleep. When morning comes I will wring out my clothes from today's doubt and attempts of faithfulness and I will try again. Trusting that my God will haul me out of the waters if need be. Trusting that you, my fellow disciples, will drag me back into this boat of ours yet again. Thanks be to God.