

## **Get Out of the Boat**

**August 3, 2008**

Today's Gospel lesson is the familiar text of Jesus walking on water from Matthew 14. Before we read that story, it is helpful to note what happens earlier in the chapter. John the Baptist, who has been in prison, is beheaded by Herod. The bad news reaches Jesus and he just wants to go be alone, to be able to mourn for his friend, his cousin, and God's prophet, but the crowds hear that Jesus is nearby, so thousands gather. Rather than ignoring them so he can be alone, Jesus is moved with compassion and feeds the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. After that miracle is complete, many from the crowd want to speak to Jesus, learn from him, and receive his healing. The disciples need him too, but Jesus still takes the time to go up to the mountain by himself to pray.

Jesus knows that there is never a perfect time to drop everything and attend to our spiritual lives. We feel overcommitted and busy ourselves, but if we wait until every possible hindrance is removed before we act, we will never spend any time listening for God. It is a matter of priorities and making time within the rhythm of our lives to attend to spiritual matters. I can promise you one thing: time we invest to attune our hearts and minds to God's purpose will pay great dividends. Disciplines like prayer, personal Bible Study, journaling, and talking with a Christian about our faith help us grow in faith. Listen now as the story continues.

### **Matthew 14:22-33:**

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning, he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord. ALL: THANKS BE TO GOD.

Have you ever heard the story about three ministers who go fishing together in a small boat? One of them realizes he forget some of his lures back in the cabin, so he gets out of the boat and walks on the water to the shore. Then, the second one said he had

forgotten his lucky fishing vest on the front porch. He followed after his friend and walked on the water to the shore. When they returned, the third man was amazed, but then he reasoned to himself, "My faith is as strong as those guys. I bet I can do it too." So he stepped out of the boat and promptly sank. His friends dragged him back into the boat, but he was determined to try again. He stepped out, and immediately sank again. As his friends pulled him back, he muttered, "My faith seems as strong as yours. Why can't I walk on the water?" The first two looked sheepishly at each other and one finally said, "We'd better tell him where those rocks are before he drowns."

In Matthew's Gospel, the possibility of drowning was no laughing matter. When Jesus goes to pray, he tells his disciples to get into their boat and go to sea. By following Jesus' instructions, the disciples end up in the middle of a storm. Isn't that the way life goes? If we are following Jesus, we sometimes end up in the middle of more trouble than we bargained for.

It must have been a pretty nasty storm to frighten the disciples. Remember that Peter, Andrew, James, and John were experienced fishermen and navigators. Jesus called those disciples away from their fishing nets, but on this dark, stormy night, even they feel like they are in over their heads. These seasoned professionals were struggling to keep the boat from capsizing in the midst of the waves and the wind. In the midst of this storm, the disciples see a strange figure heading towards them. They are already scared and now wonder if they have to worry about a monster or a ghost.

When ministers preach on this story, they usually talk about how Peter was a big failure. Some Christians suppose that if Peter only concentrated a little bit harder and had kept his eyes on Jesus, he could have walked on water. I think we miss the whole point of the story if we call Peter a failure.

Who is more of a failure? The person who gets out of the boat and makes an effort, or the one who does not even try and criticizes from the boat? Because he goes out on a limb and takes a risk, Peter knows what it feels like, at least for a few seconds, to walk on water. In this story, Peter is far more successful than the other eleven disciples because he trusts God enough to step out on faith.

Peter stumbles and falls, like a toddler who is learning how to walk. Jesus, like a supportive parent, is there to reach out and keep Peter from falling too hard. Jesus asks Peter privately before they return to the boat, "Why did you doubt me?" Jesus' question is not intended to belittle Peter, but to reassure him and show him that Christ will be by his side throughout life's storms.

The kind of fear that the disciples experience on the boat is a common emotion throughout the Bible. In fact, the Old Testament tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Jesus' mother Mary is afraid when the angel first appears to her and Moses has to overcome his fears of facing up to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

This week, I started thinking about our modern-day fictional heroes. I was amazed that almost all of our heroes have to overcome some kind of fear. For example, in *The Return of the Jedi*, Luke Skywalker faces his fear of turning to the dark side of the force and confronts his father, Darth Vader. In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo overcomes his fear of the ring controlling him. Harry Potter faces his fear of death and

confronts Voldemort. In C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* series, the four children are initially afraid of Aslan the lion, who symbolically represents Christ, but, by getting to know Aslan, the children discover tremendous strength. I have not seen the new Batman movie yet, but I have heard Batman must rise above temptation and fear in *The Dark Knight*.

Fear is not necessarily our enemy: it is a normal, especially when we are facing a new situation. New parents worry about how to raise their children. New students worry about how they will fit in at a new school. Fear signals we are facing an important decision. Fear and growth go hand-in-hand because growing involves us taking on new challenges and exploring uncomfortable, new places. One of my favorite quotations is, "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. There was no one there." The heroes of the Bible rely on their faith to respond creatively to their fears.

John Ortberg has written a book entitled *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. Ortberg argues that in order to do something great we have to face our fears and take risks. Fear of failure keeps us in the boat, paralyzing many of us and keeping us from pursuing our God-given purpose.

In his book, Ortberg describes how Jonas Salk developed a vaccine for polio after two hundred unsuccessful attempts. When it finally worked, someone asked him, "How did it feel to fail two hundred times?" Salk replied, "I never failed 200 times in my life. I was taught not to use the word failure. I just discovered 200 ways not to vaccinate for polio."<sup>1</sup>

I have been inspired to see how people in this congregation have responded courageously to life's hardships. I have seen many of you rely on your faith to give you the strength to be resilient in the face of bad news, setbacks, or a worrisome medical diagnosis. Morgan Dunnigan's courage and her entire family's dedication have inspired so many of us. We will miss their family as they move to Ohio, but we will never forget the ways they have touched our lives. Over three years after his initial diagnosis, Andrew Stevens has taken many positive steps, including his plans a hike he has called "Cancer Takes a Hike." I have been amazed to see church members, who in spite of their own setbacks, actively seek out ways they can reach out to friends and neighbors who are in need.

Sir Edmund Hillary made several unsuccessful attempts at scaling Mount Everest before he finally achieved his goal. After one attempt, he stood at the base of the giant mountain and shook his fist at it. "I'll defeat you yet," he said in defiance. "Because you're as big as you're going to get, but I'm still growing." Time after time, Hillary climbed the mountain and could not reach the top. But every climb, he learned. And every time he learned, he tried again until one day he made it to Everest's summit.<sup>2</sup>

The life of faith is risky. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had never taken the risk, he would never have learned the

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<sup>1</sup> John Ortberg, *If You want to Walk on Water You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ortberg, p. 24.

meaning of faith. The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if people imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.” Bonhoeffer goes on to draw the theological paradox that emerges from this scene: only the one who believes is obedient, and only the one who is obedient believes. “Faith is only real where there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience.”<sup>3</sup>

In the disciples’ hour of need, Jesus came to them. That is what Jesus always does for his followers; Jesus is present with us when we are being pushed by the waves and feeling overwhelmed by life’s storms. Jesus’ assurance for the disciples and for us to take heart and not to be afraid seems deceptively simple, but the Good News is that Christ’s power offers us an anchor amidst life’s storms.

In this story, Matthew tells us that Christ calls us to overcome our fears and to get out of the boat. Our faith and trust allow us to discover a sense of peace, even boldness, amidst life’s storms. When we fail, it is not the end of the world because just as he rescues Peter from the water, Christ picks us up when we fall. Thanks be to God, our anchor amidst life’s storms. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Macmillan Co, pp. 53-60.