

*Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York*  
*Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York*  
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*Tenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 14A – August 9, 2020*

*I Kings 19:9-18, Psalm 85:8-13, Romans 10:5-15*

*Matthew 14:22-33*

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN*

Walking on water. There's an enduring fascination with this story, which occurs in three out of the four gospels (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6.45-52; John 6.15-21), but only Matthew gives us the detail about Peter's experience. Of all the miracle stories recorded in the New Testament, this one just may be the flashiest.

So, is that why the gospel-writers tell it? Is that why this story's been preserved all these years – because it was a pretty keen trick, surpassing anything Harry Houdini could ever pull off?

No, the reason this story is told and retold is because there's wisdom in it -- wisdom about the life of faith and how to live it.

Let's set the scene. As we heard last week, Jesus and his disciples have just received fearsome and terrible news: John the Baptizer has been executed by King Herod. John, that great prophet of righteousness, was killed because of a promise Herod made to his stepdaughter, offering her anything she asked. And her request? John's head on a platter.

News of John's execution would surely have sent a chill down the spine of each and every one of Jesus' disciples. Suddenly, their ministry of healing, preaching, teaching and feeding people – all positive activities – sounded dangerous. Who could say if one of *their* heads might soon be resting on a platter?

But they'd gone from anxiety to jubilation after a day of ministry, as they had somehow fed a crowd of maybe 15,000 to 20,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. How had they done it? Not one of them could say. But they were beginning to realize that this man they called “Master” was powerful in ways they could scarcely imagine.

Now, as this story opens, Jesus finally has gone off by himself and sent his disciples in a boat across the Sea of Galilee. A fierce storm blows up in no time at all – this is a

common occurrence on the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly, they're fighting for their lives, bailing for all they're worth. Whoever's hand is on the tiller is struggling to keep their little craft pointed into the wind.

Then they see him. There, off to one side of the boat: a figure walking on top of the water. They suppose it's some kind of apparition, so they're afraid. But they hear: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And they recognize his voice.

Then Peter says the strangest thing: "Lord, since it is you, command me to come to you on the water." We can't know for sure why he says those words. But I'd say that he's so moved by Jesus that he wants to be with him – however that turns out.

Whatever the case, when Jesus does command Peter to come, without hesitation he sets one foot over the side, then the other. To his amazement, he too is walking on top of the water!

But then, Peter looks down. Big mistake. What does he see in that moment of sheer terror? What this tough old fisherman sees is only the same waters he's sailed on all his life – waters that never once held him high and dry, as they're doing now. Peter begins to sink.

"Lord, save me!" he cries – and just then, Jesus catches hold of his wrist and pulls him up. "You of little faith," he says, "why did you doubt?"

So, Jesus and Peter climb into the boat, and immediately the storm ceases to rage. "Truly, you are the Son of God," the disciples confess, one and all.

So why does Jesus do it? To impress and astound? Or to teach them something very profound?

It's to teach them. This story of walking on the water communicates, as nothing else could, that although there are risks and fears in the life of faith, Jesus always is present in the midst of chaos.

Faith is a risky business. Most of us here easily forget that as we connect to zoom for our service on a lovely summer morning. Did any of us risk a thing in choosing to attend worship this morning?

But that's not how it always is in the life of faith. For instance, we know how difficult it is to be a Christian in China – that a person's practice of our faith can result in him or her being charged with a crime and imprisoned. Even for those of us who have

always lived in the United States, we know there are times of personal challenge when faith doesn't come easily – when there's struggle or pain, when all of our choices seem to lead only to unhappiness, when the valley of the shadow of death (whatever that may mean for each of us individually) is all too near. In such dreadful moments, the choice between faith and no-faith looms in all its stark simplicity. A part of us fears it will make no difference, ultimately, which option we choose.

Faith, by its very nature, is a risky business. If we had the opportunity to speak to Elijah, he'd confirm that. And it's not always apparent why. You might remember that in the book of First Kings before the text we heard today, that God had sent Elijah to warn the chosen people that they had, once again, broken their covenant with God. In a test of his authority, Elijah had won his challenge to the prophets of Ba'al. Over time, King Ahab of Israel had forsaken YHWH God and instead had worshiped Ba'al, who his wife, Jezebel had called "god." And Ahab had led his people to do the same thing. Some did; others tried to worship both YHWH and Ba'al. Ahab and Jezebel killed the prophets who were faithful only to YHWH. There were 450 prophets who carried out the duplicitous tradition of serving both YHWH and Ba'al.

But only Elijah was faithful to YHWH alone. And, after a number of challenges between Elijah and the unfaithful prophets, ultimately Elijah showed that YHWH was the only God, and (with God's power) he killed the 450 traitorous prophets. The people of Israel, once again, returned to worship YHWH as their God, but King Ahab fled and told Jezebel what Elijah had done. So she swore to kill Elijah in revenge.

And although he'd been victorious, Elijah still felt threatened. He ran for 40 days and nights to hide in a cave on Mount Horeb – also known as Mount Sinai. God called to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah felt sorry for himself: "I alone am left," he told God, "and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (1 Kings 19:10b.) Elijah was blessed to meet God on the mountain. There were the proverbial "acts of God" that our insurance companies don't want to guard against: gale force wind, earthquake, and fire. But God wasn't in any of those demonstrations of power and might. God was in the sheer silence that followed.

Like Elijah, even when we appear to be strong and successful, the time will come when our own inner reserves are not sufficient to keep us going. Then, it's time to rely on God, not knowing exactly what will follow. One Christian who has experienced this describes it thus: "When you come to the edge of all the light you know, and are about to step off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing one of two things will happen: there will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught how to fly."

When Peter steps out of that boat onto the open water, there's one thing he quickly realizes, despite his desire to be with Jesus: he does not have within himself the power to do the thing he has set out to do. Peter can't walk on water; he knows it. But he steps out because, at that very moment, he is looking into the eyes of his master and reaching for his hand, and those eyes and that hand tell him he can do it. And, so he can – at least for a moment. And then, as Matthew tells it, Peter "notices the strong wind." He gets distracted from the one who gives him strength. He begins to sink, and then it's only the grip of Jesus' hand upon Peter's wrist that holds him up.

Author, philosopher and theologian C.S. Lewis has described faith in this way:

"God designed the human machine to run on himself. He is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn... That is why it is no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness apart from himself, because there is no such thing."

Faith is not some virtue we practice. It is a gift we are given by almighty God, and we experience it through our Lord, Jesus Christ. We do not generate it from within ourselves, but we do need to claim the gift. We do need to respond to the Lord's invitation. We do need to leave the safety and familiarity of the boat. If we're going to walk on water, the only way to start is by getting our feet wet.

This spring and summer have been a challenge to our faith. For some of us, it's being isolated that is depressing and almost impossible to take. For others, there is the fear of the consequence of losing our job, our income, our health insurance, our ability to pay for our home. For still others, there's the threat of having this virus take over our bodies and maybe even kill us. And for others, there's the continuing danger of being stopped by police because of the color of our skin, maybe being arrested for no other reason, or being physically harmed – or even killed – for no reason we can fathom.

But no matter what we face, God is with us, whether as YHWH, as Jesus or as Holy Spirit. And no matter what happens, God will stay with us and bring either us through the peril to live our continued earthly life, or else to life eternal if the menace concludes our discipleship.

No matter what. No matter what.

No matter what.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **AMEN**