

OPENING SENTENCE: To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

PRAYER of ADORATION: All praise belongs to God, Lord of all worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Ruler of Judgement Day. It is you that we worship, and to you we appeal for help. Show us the straight way, the way of those You have graced. AMEN.

Sermon: "Stepping Into Faith"

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he 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." He 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."

Matthew 14:22-33 is a text filled with vivid imagery. The picture of the disciples sent on their own across troubled seas and of Jesus walking on water to save them and to calm the waters is a picture that has given comfort, encouragement, and challenge to Christians over the generations. This text and its parallel text in Mark 6:45-52 and John 6:16-21 have been used over the centuries to remind us that Jesus often calls us to go into uncharted waters, but when we go in faithfulness, he never abandons us. There is a variety of rich images in this text that bring to life important dimensions of God's call and God's assurance to us.

The image of Jesus taking time to pray, even in a very uncertain situation, is a reminder that things are never so turbulent or so urgent as to take us away from the necessity of prayer.

The image of Jesus sending out the disciples on a mission just as he sends us in mission today.

The image of choppy seas and the reality that when we set out on Christ's mission, though often we will be in troubled waters, Jesus does not abandon us but rather comes to us, as he came to the disciples, when we need him most.

The image that Jesus and the reign of God that he inaugurates have power even over forces of nature and can conquer our fears and the evil that causes them.

The image of the disciples who, because of their fear, could not recognize Jesus when he came to them in ways they never expected. (Walking on water)

The image of Jesus calming the troubled waters for the disciples and the reality that he can calm our troubled waters as well.

The image of the disciples responding to Jesus' saving grace through the worship and through the confession "Truly you are the Son of God" (v.33)

All of these images have rich power for interpreting the love of God, the saving grace of Jesus Christ, our calling to be in mission, and the assurance of Christ's love and companionship when we need it most.

However, what is unique to the gospel of Matthew's version of these events, and not found in Mark and John's accounts, are the dialogue with Peter and Peter's attempt to step out of the boat and walk on water to

Jesus, in response to the command of his Lord. It is this encounter that may have the richest imagery to enable the word of God to speak to us through this passage.

Like the other disciples, Peter is panicked both by the turbulent waters and by this figure walking toward them on the water in the very early morning hours. Even after Jesus speaks to the disciples, they are still not sure if this is Jesus. Peter, knowing that the call to discipleship is unique to his relationship with Jesus, responds, “Lord’ if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (v.28). When Jesus issues the command, “Come”, Peter steps out of the boat in faith and in faithfulness.

Having embarked on his journey across the sea in faith, he then becomes frightened, but the strong arm of Jesus lifts him up and returns him to the boat.

What is so clear from this passage is that we are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are to be faithful to the call of Christ. Stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters or be filled with fear, but it is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, that when we need it most, he will extend his arm to lift us up and get us back in the boat.

Ernest Campbell, the pastor of Riverside Church in New York states, “The reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it.” He was right. The key to faith and fullness of life in Christ is to follow Peter’s example and be willing to step out of the comfort and security of the boat and head into the troubled waters of the world to proclaim the love, mercy, and justice of God that we find in Jesus Christ.

Being a disciple is a risky and exciting business, but that is exactly what God calls us to do and to be, and God assures us that if we “get out of the boat,” we can count on the accompaniment of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.

This story follows the account of the feeding of the multitude, which began with Jesus trying to get away to pray alone and the crowd persisting. Now that the crowd has been fed and dismissed, Jesus tries again. In the earlier story, Jesus gets away to pray, and then feeds the multitude.

In this story, Jesus gets away to pray, then walks on water. Matthew does not want us to miss the clear parallel between the prayer life of Jesus and the mighty things he does. Later in the story, Peter cries out in the storm, “Lord, save me!” (v.30). His cry to Jesus may look like the prayers of many of Jesus’ disciples, then and now. Jesus, however, prays before the storm, not in the storm, or after the storm like us. Matthew does not want us to miss this, either: It is the prayer before the storm that informs a sure-footed, “Do not be afraid” presence when the winds pick up.

How many characters are in this story? It is a trick question. Of course, if all the disciples are present, there are thirteen. For preaching, however, there are three characters. Jesus speaks and acts; Peter speaks and acts; and the other disciples speak and act as one. The eleven disciples are treated with one voice in Matthew’s account. This is significant for preaching, because it highlights the effect that one person’s risk can mean for the rest of a community.

When Jesus begins walking toward the boat, the disciples are terrified.

At the end of the story, when they are all back on the boat and the wind has ceased, they worship Jesus. Between their fear and worship is one disciple’s risk and security in the arms of grace. The trust and risk of one follower of Jesus has an effect on the whole community of followers. Individuals who risk boldly and move toward the call of Jesus can make a difference in the lives of other believers.

Fear is the recurring theme in this story. The phrases “Terrified”, “Cried in fear”, “Do not be afraid”, and “Became frightened” all occur in just eleven verses, an appeal from the author that this theme does not get overlooked. Fear plays many roles in this story. If this were a Greek tragedy and fear was a character, the character would leave several times to change masks. The first mask would display sheer terror as the disciples see Jesus walking toward them. This may be fear of the unknown, or it may be the fear that is

present during challenges in our lives. A change of mask would then reveal fear in the guise of motivator, moving Peter to risk going toward Jesus in the storm.

A final mask would show fear mingled with distraction as Peter's attention is drawn from Jesus to the waves that crash around him. When Peter notices the wind, fear of his situation diminishes his faith. So, when we fear Jesus moving towards us, or our fear moves us toward Jesus, or our fear distracts us, Jesus remains the constant enemy of all the different faces of fear. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (v.27). Focusing on the presence of Jesus dispels the fear.

Some theologians treat Peter's going under the violent waters as a baptismal image and preach this story through the lens of baptism. There are rich contrast between the image of baptism and most baptisms today. Most current church baptisms, even in traditions that immerse, are rather risk free. The baptizer and the person being baptized walk down steps into a heat controlled, fiberglass pool. Often, the baptizer will wear fishing waders to keep from getting wet. Then, after the baptism, the candidate is greeted by baptism committee members who offer warm towels and a hair dryer.

Our current baptismal practices stand in strict contrast to the risky steps that Peter takes as he approaches his Lord across a raging sea. His feet do not land on a fiberglass bottom. This baptismal image is filled with risk and trust and commitment. Fierce storms, compelling risk, and real danger may be better images for the life that follows baptism.

After Peter cried out, "Lord, save me!" and Jesus reached out his hand and caught him, Jesus said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (v.31). This may not be a rhetorical question. Why did Peter doubt? Why do we doubt in the presence of the one who constantly conquers the storms? Peter stepped toward Jesus because of an informed trust. Jesus had never failed him. Still, the strong wind scared him. His risk, however, created a deeper trust in the steadfast grace that continued to save.

The sermon may demean "little faith" and challenge listeners with big faith, but Matthew offers another possibility. In Matthew 17:20 the evangelist says, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it will move."

In the story that precedes this one, five thousand people are fed out of one lunch pail.

Peter had only a little faith, but nobody else got out of the boat. A little faith may be all that is needed to transform a story that starts in terror into a story that ends in worship.

PRAYER: Stay with us, Lord, for it is almost evening and the day is almost over. You are our lamp, O Lord. You lighten our darkness. You calm the storms and unsettled waters. You are our God, our strong refuge, and you have made our way safe. AMEN.

BENEDICTION: Getting out of the boat with Jesus is the most risky, most exciting, most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest. Matthew 14:22-33 invites us to do just that. GO IN PEACE!