

Sermon Aug 9 2020  
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Grace Mercy and Peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

I hope that you all have recovered from the tropical storm Isaias which tore through our area this past week. The weather and the elements are always something to be careful around, but especially in the summertime, when our east coast hurricane season starts up. I also hope you have been able to have some semblance of vacation during this unusual summer. In the heat of summer, one of the blessings of being on the coast of the continent is that it's easy to get to the beach. I've been fortunate to be able to do that with my family a few times this summer. And there is nothing like beating the heat by getting in the water. Full submersion, into the surf, and when the water temperature is comfortable, there is nothing like getting in for a swim.

The weather and elements play a large role in our lessons from scripture today. A prophet confronts the elements, but finds that God is not in them, yet God is still with him. And in the Gospel lesson, the disciples confront a stormy sea, high winds, and one of their number takes a dip. But Peter wasn't interested in getting in the water at all. He was interested to get to Jesus, to be with Jesus. And the stormy waters around him symbolized a dangerous primordial chaos, a chaos that threatens to envelope human life, choke it, and swallow us whole.

Of course, this episode in the Gospel story can be used by Christians to signify different things. For example, if someone wants to use the story to emphasize having the courage to follow Jesus, then they focus on Peter's act of getting out of the boat in the first place, and acting on that impulse or desire to be with Jesus out on the stormy sea of life. If you want to emphasize the power of Jesus to rescue the lost, then you focus on Jesus reaching out his hand to prevent Peter from sinking into chaos and destruction. There is a bluegrass gospel song made popular by the Purple Halls, called Get in the Boat. The refrain proclaims with a sly smile, that if you can't walk on water, you better get in the boat. Still others will use the story to point to Jesus' divine powers and his command over the

weather and the elements, and this, coming right on the heels of the miracle of the feeding of the 5 thousand, which was the Gospel lesson last week.

What I like to focus on in this miracle story is what the parts of the story teach us about our relationship with Jesus. I'm not interested in arguing with people about whether such miracles are believable, and I'm not interested in focusing on just one aspect of the story to the detriment of other aspects of the story. What I like is what the whole story says about our relationship with Jesus. This is not just a story about Jesus' divine power, or about Peter walking on water and being rescued by Jesus. It is also a story about the church rising to meet Jesus out in the world, and also about how Jesus is still needed to save the church.

Here's the buildup to walking on water: Jesus and the disciples have just fed over 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. It is an amazing miracle that reveals God's gracious bounty in the presence of Jesus with the people. Now Jesus wants to be alone for a while, and orchestrates some downtime for himself by getting the disciples to get in the boat and cast off for the opposite shore, while he dismisses the crowd of people. That trip across the lake will be the shortcut that the crowd can't use to get back home. In this deft move, Jesus frees himself from everyone, and Matthew says, he retreats further into the wilderness and spends the night alone resting and praying. We know Jesus wanted to do this in the first place, when he first heard about the execution of John the Baptist. He wanted to get away, to rest, to pray, to grieve. But when he was followed by the crowd, we are told that Jesus had compassion on the crowd. Instead of running away from the crowd, and despite his deep desire for retreat and rest, he ministered to them, cured their infirmities, and then fed the whole lot of them.

Finally, after enjoying his retreat from everyone, Jesus decides to return to his disciples. To get to them, where they have been pushed by the wind out into deeper water, Jesus must either swim or fly, or walk on water. Well, he also could have just walked around the lake, the way the crowd did, and met them on the other side, but Jesus isn't limited by these choices. The disciples have been blown off course by the wind, and Jesus wants to be with them, and so he goes to them in the most straightforward way, across the water.

When the disciples see Jesus coming to them on the water, a couple of things happen. First, they are terrified and think it's a ghost, but Jesus calms them with a

word, saying “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Then, Peter wants to come to Jesus, out on the water. He makes it into a test, thinking that if it is really Jesus, and not a ghost, Jesus will respond to his request to command him to come to him.

And then another miracle happens. Peter starts to walk on water! He heads toward Jesus, but then notices the wind, and he starts to sink. Jesus then reaches out to rescue him, and chides him for having “little faith” and doubting. Once they are back in the boat, the wind stops blowing, as if by command. All at once, the disciples in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” This is the first time in Matthew’s Gospel story where humans have actually used the phrase “Son of God” to address Jesus.

What I choose to focus on in this story is the desire of Jesus and Peter, and the power of Jesus that Peter doesn’t have. The desire of Jesus is to come to his disciples (even out in the middle of the lake), the desire of Peter is to come to Jesus where he is doing what he does, and the gracious power of Jesus is to reach out and rescue Peter in his relative weakness. To sum it up, the desire of Jesus, the desire of the disciples, and the need for the disciples’ rescue. Taken together, as insights in our spiritual education as the church, these three moments teach us what it means to follow Jesus. And Peter’s desire is especially instructive.

Jesus’ desire is seen in the fact that, after dismissing the crowds and spending the night in retreat and rest, he turns to catch up with them. He wants to be with them, so much so that he will walk over the water in the shortest distance possible. Then Peter, one of the most exemplary disciples in the story, tries to go to meet Jesus, even though this means walking on water. Of course, he sinks. Of course he does. He is not Jesus. Another lesson learned. But then Jesus rescues the sinking disciple.

What it shows, however, is that Peter’s imagination has been piqued. For who of us would think of walking on water, even if we saw Jesus standing on it? I don’t think I would. I would probably have tried to turn the boat toward Jesus, or even jump in to swim to him. But Peter has seen what Jesus can do, and he wants to know if he can too. Remember, in the scene before this one, Peter has been walking with the other disciples among the hungry crowd, handing out the bread and fish in his basket, and having it never run out! The bits of bread and fish just

keep mysteriously replenishing themselves, until all are fed. Now he sees Jesus on the water and wants to know if he can join him in that too. What is happening to Peter's mind, and to his faith, is what should be happening in the other disciples' minds. They should know that they have been invited to do what Jesus has done. This lesson is articulated in the Gospel of John chapter 14:12 this way, when Jesus tells the disciples, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

So Peter's desire isn't borne of ignorance, or the will to perform a miracle. It's more about who Jesus is and what Jesus does. We are invited to participate in the amazing deeds of the Messiah. As disciples in the mold of Peter, that opens up our minds to what we may be called to do as church. What has Jesus done as the Messiah that we are not called to do? Jesus heals, and we are called to heal. Jesus teaches, and we are called to teach. Jesus reaches out to those who are despised or neglected. We are called to reach out to those who are despised or neglected. Jesus gives his life as a sacrifice for the sake of others who are in need, and so we are called to live lives of sacrifice for the sake of others who are in need.

The third piece of this lesson for the church is that Peter is rescued. That walking on water thing didn't actually work out too well for him. Jesus points out that it is his faith that has faltered. But that doesn't make it any less a reality that, when we try to do what Jesus does, we find that ultimately, we fail too. But the effort is not a waste of time. By God's grace, the church in fact is often successful in what it sets out to do. Think of our own situation, we have set out to continue our ministry to the surrounding community by holding online services. And we have done it. We have strived to continue to minister to those who are hurting or less fortunate by supporting those in need, and we have done it. We have set out to maintain a constructive engagement with our youth through online Sunday School, confirmation, and VBS, and we have done it. Is it all perfect? No. Is it fraught with mistakes? Yes. And do we regularly miss more opportunities to reach out to others around us who are in particular need? Yes. We fail. We falter. We sink.

And that is where God's grace should most clearly address us. Even in all the many ways that the church reaches out in ministry to a hurting world, we never do enough. We never maintain those connections perfectly. And we often fail to

reach out, especially in the most sensitive and difficult areas of life such as race relations and social justice, simply because of fear and our own misunderstanding. And Jesus' response to Peter is the same as it is to us: O ye of little faith, why do you doubt? We don't know, Jesus, why we doubt so much. We don't know why we are so afraid. We don't know why we hold back. But we have come to know and to trust that in our failing, in our fear, in our sin, you are there, and you are ever reaching out to grab our outstretched hands, to lift, to support, to raise us up, bring us back to the safety of the boat, and calm the winds around us. We give you thanks, not just for walking on the water, but for wanting to be with us in the first place. And we give you thanks, for you rescue and redeem us when we need saving. May we be inspired to boldly proclaim your presence in the world that you love, and may our ministries be an extension and sign of your gracious, helping hand to all those in need.

And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.