

“Walking on Water”

A Sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey

Noe Valley Ministry 9/2/2007

Matthew 14.23-33

23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,* for the wind was against them. 25And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. 26But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. 27But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’ HOW OFTEN we want to carry our fears instead of them carrying us....

This story of Jesus calming the sea comes right after the news of John the Baptist’s death. Jesus tries to get away, but folks follow him. He finds himself on a hillside with thousands of people clamoring for healings and teaching. He tends to them. He even feeds the 500. But he still needs to get away.

Jesus gathers the disciples and sets them in a boat -- the longtime symbol of the church, by the way. He climbs back up the mountainside alone, stopping first to send the crowds away. He lets them touch him and thank him, until finally, he gets to rest, to pray, to remember who he is, what his call is.

The scene shifts, and we take it up here, as the reading continues:

“28 Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ 29He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. 30But when he noticed the strong wind,* he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ 31Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ 32When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’

Now, what we are going to do is act this out.

I invite all who are willing to stand up. Elizabeth, there’s even a place for you in your chair, if you want...

This story is in three of the four gospels, but Matthew is the only one who includes this episode of Peter jumping out of the boat. Each of your own experiences is important in understanding the impact of the story. But Matthew especially wants us to connect with Peter.

Matthew is writing to a community in turmoil, undergoing persecution by those around them. In a very real sense the winds were against them. But faith can weather the storm. God’s self revelation is always good news. Relationships are not possible without taking risks.

“Take heart, It is I, Do not be afraid.”

Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the power of his God. If Peter had never taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith. We know God is with us.

It's just that we forget. For most of us, our Fear that God is not really on our side, that God will put us out on a limb and leave us. It is the fear that in the midst of the storm we will be overcome.

One of the great fears of the ancient people was that God would fall asleep. Really. When the prophets of Baal could not get their Gods to rain down fire on the top of Mt. Carmel, Elijah taunted them: Maybe your God is asleep, he said. On the other hand, the Jews took great comfort in the fact that the God of Israel neither slumbered nor slept.

So Over and over God promises to be with us.

When Moses set out for the Promised Land, turning his back on everything he knew, God spoke to him: Fear not Abram, I am your shield and your reward will be great.

When the Jews stood at the Red Sea and could see Pharaoh's chariots coming on the horizon, they cried out that they would all be slaughtered. Moses said to them: Stand still, fear not, and see the salvation of the Lord.

When the angel of the Lord came to Mary and said that she would bear a child, she trembled with fear. What would become of her? Said the angel: Fear not Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Fear not, fear not. Say our scriptures. Over seventy times this is held up, more than any other human emotion. So if you have your fears, you are not alone, trust me. Paul, writing to the young disciple Timothy said, God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, power and a sound mind.

God has given us faith.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the staircase."

“Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe” wrote Augustine.

From Christian missionary E. Stanley Jones: Faith is not merely your holding on to God- it is God holding on to you. God will not let you go! “

And finally, from John Calvin: “Faith is not a distant view but a warm embrace of Christ.”

Peter, what are you doing? You can't walk on water! Peter you can't do that.
But Peter does.

I don't know what storm of life will come your way this week, or what storm you may be enduring at this very moment. But I know this: even as the storm rages around you, if you will listen very carefully with your heart, you will hear a gentle voice calling to you, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And in time the storm will pass. And Jesus will still be there. You know the saying, if you feel distant from God, who moved?

Jesus comes precisely when we are rowing against the wind and making no headway at all. He calls to us out of the future. He tells us not to be afraid. He calls us to come to him. Some get out of the boat and test the water. Some take a step or two into that future. As millions of sermons have said, Peter was okay as long as he had his eyes on Jesus; as long as he had faith and conviction. Faith involves our venturing out, doing things we had never dreamed of, trusting that God will take care of us.

When have you felt sideswiped by a raging storm and been frightened? What are the winds and the waves that batter you? Have you had companions in that storm? What has been a focus of help? Have you prayed? When had doubt caused you to sink into anxiety, trip into more adversity? How has Jesus appeared, holding out his hands, inspired you to splendid action, risk-taking in spite of the storms? When have you been in a boat, battered and fearful, and seen Jesus comes walking toward you? .

Faith is not a passive trusting that God will come to us when we are down and out. Faith is an active process of living a vital, full life - going places we would never go, loving people we would never love, living life to the fullest because we have met the Master.

I don't know what walking on the water would mean for you. It might mean taking an airplane trip despite your fear, despite danger to your emotional state. It might mean giving up something or someone you care about, in search of something more authentic or more important. It might mean facing a terrifying fear or phobia. It might mean entering a program or course that requires serious commitment. It might mean having a child on your own.

We all have times we are afraid. And we all have times when we get out of the boat and walk toward Jesus. May your fears abate and your faith inflate. God is with us. Thanks be to God.