

Walking on water

Proper 14A, August 13, 2023

Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28; Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45b;

Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

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In the name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen.

Last Sunday, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, we closed our eyes and imagined that we were part of the Gospel story, as if we really were there on that mountaintop with Moses and Elijah and our fellow disciples, completely overcome by the experience. We wondered what we might bring back from our mountaintop experiences to bless our own journeys- things like gratitude, and healing, and the sureness of God's presence with us. We were honest about what it means to be human in moments like these- our awe and amazement; our terror and our confusion; our desire to

somehow bottle up all the radiance and glory so we could hold them close and never let them go.

We know we can't do that- that a true faith journey means not staying in one place, no matter how beautiful or how safe- but *always continuing onwards*. Once we have experienced God in this way, we can never go back to who we were before. We are changed, but still human- we still try to put God in a box; we still miss the places where God shows up and then want proof that it really is God; and, especially when we are afraid, we still doubt God's protection and cry out to God to save us *as if God were not already right there*. What matters most in all of this is nothing that we ourselves do, but **God's** long-promised and abiding presence with us, inviting us always to go deeper, to sink- pun fully intended- into an ever-deeper knowing of who God is and all the fullness of how this transforms us.

As you know, I love wondering together where we find ourselves in these scriptural stories as a way of applying them to our own lives of faith and kingdom-building. I was fascinated this week to realize we can turn this around as you would flip your phone's camera from selfie mode to face away from you- a subtle shift that opens new ways of seeing. Instead of searching for ourselves in these stories, what if we look first for where we find God- how we are being invited to see the character and nature of God- and then what this means to us as God's people? Of course, these are two sides of the same coin- but I have been wondering if shifting our gaze just this tiny bit can keep us focused on God's love and protection as always available to us, centering us fully on God, not on ourselves.

Peter trying- and failing- to walk on the water is so often preached as the takeaway of today's Gospel story: that if Peter, the one on whom Jesus declares he will build

the church, can sink in dangerous waters due to a ‘lack of faith’, then this can happen to any of us. Peter is overwhelmed by the fierceness of the storm when away from the protection of the boat, but Jesus is there and ‘immediately’ rescues him when he starts to go under. And a preacher might go on to say that because of Peter’s story we can rest in the knowledge that God will reach out and save us when we call out to him. None of this is false, of course, but it makes the episode on the water all about us- our own doubts and lack of faith-and misses the high point of the story: when the disciples worship Jesus (for the first time in Matthew’s Gospel) as the Son of God. We should not hear this story as primarily a teaching about people who cannot make it through life’s storms because they do not have enough faith- it is equally about the fullness of who Jesus really is and what that means to us.

We tend to think of faith as an act of will, a way of being that we can attain by our own efforts if we only try

just a little harder. Here, I think, is the real risk from reading this story as if Peter's moment of doubt is at the core of it: *that we might come to feel guilty every time something goes wrong in our lives, as if we've somehow failed because our faith isn't enough- because we aren't enough.* This is a terrible burden, beloveds, and not something Jesus intends us to carry. Yes, Jesus does say to Peter: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?", which is often read as a criticism of Peter's lack of faith, and possibly on some level it is. But what if it is also an invitation to see who Jesus is ever more clearly- what if Jesus is also saying: "Peter- you know me- I have both told you in words and showed you in actions who I am. You have seen and even taken part in the miraculous things I have done, like walking on the water and healing the sick and feeding thousands and thousands of people. You heard me tell the parable of the mustard seed so you would understand that the kingdom will flourish from the smallest of beginnings- that your own faith, tiny like this

seed, will grow as you keep learning who I really am. You knew to cry out to me when your fear overwhelmed you- ***why did you give in to your doubt, when I have already given you everything you need to believe?***”

So often in the Gospels Peter is the poster child for anyone who has ever had a moment of doubt themselves- almost a caricature for our own fragile faith and awkward responses- like really, why would heavenly beings like Moses and Elijah and Jesus need shelters built for them on that mountaintop?! But Peter’s story can gift us with another, deeper meaning- inviting us to remember that faith isn’t something we have to find on our own, but that it grows within us as we open ourselves to the ways God calls us- even in difficult or overwhelming places. Maybe our faith springs up most freely in us when we step out from what is familiar and comfortable and trust that God will care for us wherever we are, even in places where life is hard and unpredictable and our human weaknesses take

over and lead to brokenness and heartbreak, as we hear in great detail in our reading from Genesis. When we are desperately searching for God to show up, straining our eyes to see God coming towards us when storms are battering us, it is our own awareness that is lacking. The voice we hear tells us, with language that goes all the way back through salvation history to connect Jesus with the God of our ancestors: “Do not be afraid- “it is I. **I am who I am**. I have always been your God, present with you and longing for you not to doubt, but to believe. My love and protection for you do not depend on your faith or your righteousness or anything you can possibly achieve on your own- you will know them simply because I am your God and I am generous to all who call upon me.”

“There are no distinctions between people,” says our reading from Romans, “but everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will know the fullness of God’s saving presence.” This is not a statement about who we are-

human beings both flawed **and** beloved- **this is a statement about God.** God has made the lifegiving wholeness of God's mercy and care available to **all** people, and because only God can do that, our efforts to know and live into this love always point us right back to God. Our most faithful work is to pay attention, to step out when we hear God calling us, believing we will be held up, the faith we need already there amidst all that threatens to sink us, knowing without a doubt that God is present and always coming towards us, hand outstretched to sustain us.

Jan Richardson, a favorite spiritual writer of mine, wrote the following reflection about her experience of God and faith in her own 'walking on water' story, eight months into her grief journey after the death of her husband:

I can tell you that I know what it means to be borne up when the waters overwhelm me.

I know the grace of hands that reach out to carry me and console me and give me courage.

I am learning—again, anew—what faith is.

This is some of what I know right now about faith:

That faith is not something I can summon by a sheer act of will.

That it lives and breathes in the community that encompasses us.

That I cannot force faith but can ask for it, can pray that it will make its way towards me and bear me up over the next wave, and the next.

That it comes.

That I can lean into it.

That it will propel me not only toward the Christ who calls me, but also back toward the boat that holds my life, incomprehensible both in its pain and its grace.

Amen.

