



“In Peter’s Soggy Shoes”

a sermon by

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Our lesson for this afternoon comes from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 14:22-33. John the Baptist has been put to death by Herod, and Jesus, having heard this news, had been on his way to pray when he saw that a crowd was following them and had compassion upon them and with his disciples fed all 5,000 of them along the shores of the sea of Galilee with a few loaves and a couple of fish. Here begins our reading. Hear the Word of God: 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, Jesus 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." Jesus 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 worshiped Jesus, saying "Truly you are the Son of God." Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

There are divided feelings about this text among the commentators. Some argue that Peter here represents the voice of Satan speaking through the disciples challenging Jesus to prove himself before the eye of the reader. Others utilize this text metaphorically as an indictment against those who leave the safe vessel of the church because they don't have enough faith that it is Jesus who is coming to them in the many oceans they travel on, and thus they begin to drown in life's troubled waters. As we continue along our journey of looking at the humanity behind the Biblical witness of those who were challenged by the presence of the living God in their midst, we do not have to look too far into this story before we meet the gaze of Peter's humanity staring right back at us.

Some of you have heard me say this before, but a friend of mine likes to refer to Peter as the Barney Fife of the disciples. Because no matter how hard he tries, Peter just can't seem to get it right about discipleship and life in Christ. Invariably the gospel writer will reveal Peter as the guy who, just when it looks like he really gets it about Jesus, totally misses the boat and turns into everyone else's "teaching moment." On the one hand he is the first to profess Jesus as the Messiah, on the other he is the first to deny him too. One moment he is watching loaves and fishes be multiplied in his hands, and the next he is wringing out his soggy shoes because he does not believe Jesus is who he says he is. And yet it is Peter who is given a special blessing and named by Jesus to be the rock on which he will build his church. It is Peter who is given the voice of the disciples, and it is the historical and parabolic Peter who Matthew uses to embody the Church as the author tries to convey something to his own congregation and to congregations for centuries to come about what it is by nature to be a follower of Christ.

It is between 3 and 6 in the morning and Jesus has sent the disciples off without him for the first time since their ministry began together when a storm sweeps up off the sea of Galilee and the boat carrying the disciples is battered by the waves and is carried far from shore. Other

gospel accounts depict the disciples straining against their oars unsuccessfully and Jesus witnessing their toil in the storm from the vantage of the hill on which he was praying. We have been in the boat with Jesus and the disciples before but Jesus was sleeping in the vessel during the storm that time and now he is no where to be seen- that is, of course, until he comes walking across the water to them. This event needs no introduction or elaboration. Matthew allows the statement to speak for itself silent volumes about divinity and power and subduing chaos. You'll remember that Matthew's Jesus is the one who speaks in all the parables- should his actions then have anything less than a loaded meaning? It is amazing how often has this image been taken for granted in our own minds, reduced to a paper doll Velcroed to the story board of virtually every Vacation Bible School classroom in history. But terror is the only appropriate and honest response of those in the boat and, though Jesus is quick to identify himself, Peter is not satisfied and poses what can only really be heard as a challenge, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." It is a peculiar request to be sure. It is not the requirement of proof that is surprising- we are on familiar ground when we find ourselves again positioned with the disciples in wonder- it is Peter's desire to be empowered by Jesus to join him on the waves that gets me, risking his own life for the proof he requires, that- and Jesus' simple invitation- as if he did not know that this was something that defied the laws of physics for the rest of us, or was an act reserved throughout ancient history for the divine only. "Come" he says. And is ready to provide. The Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard had a phrase for the kind of choice now confronting Peter. He called it the leap of faith and limits of reason. It is part of his case for belief in God and he states that there is only so much our rational mind can discern, only so many paths for it to follow before reason will exhaust itself and we are left only with the option of turning back from belief or taking the plunge into the uncertain realm of faith. In the very next moment Peter is throwing his leg over the side of the boat and, though we are not supplied with an adjective, one can assume is exhilarated as he joins his Christ on the surface of the water. My gosh, Jesus, and now Peter too, striding over a dark and troubled sea. This is a triumphant moment to be sure- and we the reader find ourselves holding our breath- like watching a child take its first steps because we quickly realize it is not a question of if the child will fall in their trek toward the outstretched arms of the parent, it is a question of when. If this scene were supplied with a soundtrack the mood would shift from the high elation of treble strings to heavy and foreboding sweeps along a string bass, "But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Peter takes a lot of heat for this- in fact, he has become quite famous for it. Like Thomas' dubious and so often misrepresented notoriety for asking to see the scars in the flesh of the risen Christ, Peter's descent into doubt has been the moral of the story for many a preacher fueling the flock for keeping their eyes on Christ. One sideways glance away from the goal, and you are sunk. And Peter, the rock upon whom the foundation of the church is built, is relegated to an illustration of disbelief. This seems odd, don't you think? After all, how often have we stepped out in full confidence of our faith only to find that things don't look quite like we'd hoped or imagined once we are outside of the boat, and Jesus is calling us to him. When we leave the known for the sake of Christ, when we surrender a piece of the claim we stake upon the course of our lives do we not also assume a touch of a sense of entitlement? Surely Peter's almost cavalier request reveals just a hint of an expectation within himself- within all of us- that stepping out in an act of faith will be rewarded with calmer waters? Is this not part of the fullness of our humanity-

the tendency to determine for God what the return for a leap of faith should look like? "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" after all, this is supposed to be about Jesus pulling through, right? It was no mystery to Peter that there was a storm going on- his boat had been battered by waves all night- Jesus empowered Peter to walk on the water but he did not promise calmer seas. He promised only himself. And when Peter's inevitable sideways glance toward the waves recalled for him the fact that he had defied the limits of his reason, reminded him that he was walking on faith and he became frightened and began to sink, it was Jesus who was waiting to reach out immediately in the moment he cried "Lord Save Me!" The request for strength turns to a plea for help- and Jesus offers both without reservation, without hesitation, for the sake of the disciples whom he loved. And the question on Peter's mind and heart becomes an occasion for grace.

"You of little faith, why did you doubt?" is the gentle reprimand of Jesus. The first part of this sentence, "you of little faith" is only used by Jesus when speaking to believers. The idea is not an indictment that Peter does not have faith, but that he is not drawing from it. As one commentator puts it, in the gospel of John for example the word belief is always a verb, never a noun- it is like a muscle that must be used to remain strong¹. The word 'doubt' is *distazo* in the Greek and is used just this one time in Matthew- it means vacillation, or wavering between anxiety and courage, between faith and doubt. And in a simple phrase Matthew summarizes the challenge of discipleship, the nature of the journey of faith for Peter and for us, and draws the humanity of the church into the fullness of God in Jesus' own words. Our faith is built upon the struggle of discipleship amidst the winds and waves of the world and on the faithfulness of Christ. Matthew shares with us through Peter that we may be empowered by Christ to step out of the comfort of what we know for the sake of faith in what we are not always sure of. And this stepping out means trusting that Jesus is present with us even when the journey toward him does not look like what we'd expected or hoped for. It means resting in assurance that he is ready and waiting to reach out to catch us when the storms we expected to subside rage on, and we are afraid and disheartened and inevitably begin to sink. The foundation of our church is the steady hand of Christ and disciples taking bold steps, and sinking down, and being lifted up, and taking bold steps again. And Christ reaching out all the while. This is what he does. In the words of an old hymn: When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down- when I was sinking down Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul. Christ laid aside his crown for my soul. God does not desire for us to drown in the depths and brokenness of our humanity, keeping the power of such holy things as drinking from the springs of eternal life to himself, but in Christ invites us to join him in the thrill of walking on water.

But when Peter 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...and those in the boat worshiped Jesus, saying "Truly you are the Son of God." Amen.

¹ *Interpretation Bible Commentary- Matthew*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, p. 170