

Year A, Proper 14  
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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August 13, 2017

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my salvation. *Amen.*

There's a story of a man who took his new hunting dog on a trial hunt one day. After a while the man shot a duck and it fell into the lake. The dog walked over the water, picked up the duck, and brought it to his master. The man was stunned. He didn't know what to think. He shot another duck, and again, it fell into the lake; and again the dog walked over the water and brought it back to his master. Hardly daring to believe his eyes, and not wanting to be thought a total fool, the man told no one about it; but the next day he called his neighbor to come shooting with him.

As on the previous day, he shot a duck and it fell into the lake. The dog walked over the water and retrieved it. His neighbor didn't say a word. As the day went on, several more ducks were shot, and each time the dog walked over the water to retrieve them. Each time the neighbor said nothing, and neither did the owner of the dog. Finally—unable to contain himself any longer—the owner asked his neighbor, “Do you notice anything strange about my dog?” “Yes,” replied the neighbor, rubbing his chin and thinking a bit. “Come to think of it, I do. Your dog doesn't know how to swim.”<sup>i</sup>

Some bible scholars find the “walking on the water” story we've heard today hard to believe because its only purpose seems to be to prove Jesus' ability to overcome the forces of nature. The story is also told in the gospels of Mark and John, without Peter's attempt to walk on the water himself, but Luke's gospel doesn't include the story at all. We shouldn't try to gauge its importance by comparing it to the other versions, instead remembering that each of the evangelists wrote with a specific purpose and point of view to address their own specific audience.

As always, it's helpful to look at the backstory. At the beginning of Matthew's Chapter 14, Jesus learns that John the Baptist has died at the hands of Herod. Immediately he gets into a boat to go to a deserted place to pray, but the crowds follow and his compassion for them compels him to go ashore to heal the sick who have been brought to him, and to feed them entire crowd with only five loaves and two fish, a story we know well. After everyone else has been taken care of, Jesus once again goes off by himself to pray, this time up the mountain. In those days, “mountains were considered places of chaos and the habitats of deities and demons, places of powers beyond human control.” By placing Jesus there, Matthew emphasizes “Jesus's holiness” and his “special place in the hierarchy of cosmic powers.”<sup>ii</sup>

Matthew says Jesus “makes” the disciples get into their boat and go ahead to the other side, but the wind and waves make for a rough trip. Matthew's first readers would know that during certain times of the year, heavy storms are common on the Sea of Galilee, often coming up quickly with little warning. The ancients generally attributed the storms to “particular nonvisible cosmic forces or powers.”<sup>iii</sup> We can imagine the disciples to be distraught and exhausted; and at the same time remember how we ourselves respond to highly stressful situations. Clear thinking doesn't always prevail.

In their book, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh caution us to understand the difference between “the sea” and “water.” Greco-Romans identified the sea with the mythical deity Poseidon, who was noted for violent power. For them, “to walk on the sea is to trample on a being that can engulf people with its waves, and swallow them in its deep...”<sup>iv</sup> Unlike Jesus on the mountain of chaos, the disciples are unable to restrain or ignore the violent sea. No wonder they're confused as Jesus comes toward them. They were exhausted and probably afraid before they even saw him.

In each account of this story, Jesus reassures them by saying “do not be afraid;” but they are not comforted or reassured by his words. Peter challenges Jesus to prove who he is, saying “Command me to come to you on the water.” For a moment it seems Peter just might be able to pull it off—but he lets himself be distracted and begins to sink. The words spoken by Jesus after he

saves Peter convict every one of us whose faith has ever faltered, and I'm guessing that is every one of us. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Notice that Jesus doesn't say "why did you doubt *me*?" I wonder if Peter's "little" faith and big doubt was more about his inability to do what Jesus called him to do than it was about our Lord's power to save him.

Surely there are few of us unfamiliar with the feelings of inadequacy that prevent us from stepping out in faith. Sadly, the church is full of people who, when asked to do something new or unfamiliar, reply that they don't have the gifts for that ministry, or they haven't been "called" to do whatever it is. When new ideas or new ways of doing things are offered, the response heard far too often is "that's not how we do things around here," or "this is how we've always done it." Sometimes when we disagree with popular thought, we're belittled or ignored. So rather than being a place where energy and enthusiasm are encouraged and empowered, the church is too often a place of *discouragement* and suppression. The value we give to our rules and traditions must *never* be greater than our love for God and our neighbors, or than our call to live together in God's grace and to share Christ's promises with others.

When I was discerning my call to the priesthood, a dear friend made me a CD of Christian songs she had selected to lift me up and help me stay focused during that time of serious self-examination, and often self-doubt. Casting Crowns' recording of "Voice of Truth" became a favorite and still is. "Oh what I would do to have the kind of faith it takes to climb out of this boat I'm in onto the crashing waves; to step out of my comfort zone into the realm of the unknown where Jesus is. And he's holding out His hand, but the waves are calling out my name, and they laugh at me—reminding me of all the times I've tried before and failed. ... But the voice of truth says, 'Do not be afraid!'" The last line of the song affirms the power of the triune God, who created us, redeemed us and sustains us. "I will choose to listen and believe the voice of truth."

Over the past few days I've witnessed the love and anguish of a family whose mother, daughter, grandmother and friend just received the diagnosis of a terminal illness. It was a harsh reminder that our time with each other is precious and limited. It underscores my sometimes-too-casual realization that we are God's gifts to each other, just as our lives are gifts from God. I personally do not want to spend any more time in conflict or disagreement, on complaints and negativity. Life is too short for that! Going forward I'll be focusing on the positives in our life together here at St. Francis. I hope that you will also.

I'm so happy to be back with you today, and deeply grateful for the gift of sabbatical time and for your prayers while we were separated. Thank you! It took a couple of weeks for me to realize how much I needed time to rest, to reflect on who I am as a priest, as the rector of this beautiful parish, and—most importantly—who I am as a child of God. I needed time to strengthen my relationship with God in Christ, to consider once again why God called me to St. Francis and keeps me here. Surely it's no coincidence that today we hear what happened when Peter let himself be distracted by the chaos around him. The moment he took his eyes off Jesus, he faltered. It's a strong reminder to us individually and as a parish to keep our eyes on Jesus, despite whatever storm rages around us or within us.

Back to the story of the hunting dog that walked across the water. Could it be that no one ever told him he *couldn't* walk on it? What might our future look like if we stopped saying "no" or "can't" and started saying "yes, I can" or even "yes, I'll give it a try?" As we begin the next phase of our life together, I'll be listening and believing the voice of truth, and I pray that you will, too. Remember that when Peter began to sink, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. If God was willing to get wet to save Peter, God will certainly do the same for you and me; but if we keep our eyes on Jesus, none of us will have to get wet. May God bless us each day with boldness to live into our purpose, the courage to step out in faith, and the peace that passes all understanding. *Amen.* And *amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Synthesis, Year A, Proper 14 – Postscript. August 13, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Malina, Bruce J. and Rohrbaugh, Richard L. *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Second Edition. Fortress Press, Minneapolis. P. 81.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. P. 82

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.