

***“How Big Is Your Faith?”***

Anybody here think you have the ability to walk on water? You know what? Neither did Peter! Today’s Gospel is a study in faith; but I suspect that we don’t usually learn the right lessons about faith through this encounter of Peter and Jesus on the Sea of Galilee.

At which point in today’s Gospel would you say Peter had faith? (You may vote more than once)

Was it when he stepped out of the boat?

Was it when he stopped being afraid of what he first thought was a ghost?

Was it when he was actually walking on the water?

How about when he began to sink?

How about when he climbed back in the boat with Jesus?

I would like to make the argument today that Peter had, and showed, faith at each point in this narrative. In the process, I hope to illuminate what faith really is AND, I will hope that you will be able to see faith at work more sharply in your own life.

What is faith? We tend to measure faith on the “Faith-O-Meter.” We begin at cold ashes of faith, then we have the small spark of faith that we hope will grow into the glowing ember of faith, and so on up the scale — past warm flame of faith to active, toasty fire of faith all the way to rip-roaring bonfire of faith. We stop there because we’re not at all sure we want to think about the conflagration of faith, the warehouse-up-in-smoke faith, and the “Sherman burns down Atlanta” faith.

We’re pretty sure that cold ashes don’t cut it; we not so sure that we want anything to do with much beyond the warm flame. So we assess our behaviors, our history, the lives of others around us, and then also the Biblical characters we encounter along this meter: *“Here’s where I had*

*a time when my faith was really glowing.” “Remember Aunt Tilly? Now there was a women who had a rip-roarin’ faith.” “How about that Abraham, ready to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Now, there’s real faith.”*

Yes, that is the distinction we make: real faith and . . . what? False faith? Can there be such a thing? Fake faith? Unreal faith? What would that be like? Pretend faith? Well, yes. We do tend to think that some people are pretending to believe. Why do they? Who knows! *“To satisfy Mom and Dad. To get Grandma off my back. To quiet my wife. It’s good for the kids.”* We have a word for such people: hypocrites. Are there hypocrites in the church? You bet! Care to point out one? I thought not. Let’s be really careful here with our words. The term hypocrite comes from the Greek ὑποκριτής (hipokritays) which is a term from Greek theater used to describe an actor who wears a mask.

Some of us have been taught that, in response to my question *“Care to point out one?”* were ready to say, *“Yes. Me!”* So let’s be cautious here. It is not hypocrisy to have serious questions, or to mess up trying to live the Christ-like life, or to struggle with “what in the world is God doing to me” concerns. That’s called life, and we are all, at some point or another, to some level or another, caught up in those issues.

Brandi Chastain, Olympic soccer star, talked about how a coach taught her that when you go out on the field you have to be convinced that you can defeat the other team, but you can’t do that then *“fake it till you make it.”* A lot of us think we have to “fake it till we make it” with faith. We want to believe, but oh those questions . . . and our reactions: *“Oops, messed up again.”* . . . *“Not again, God! Please?!”*

I think Peter can help us with this.

***“Immediately,”*** Matthew tells us, ***“[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.”*** Immediately . . . There is a sudden shift in tempo in the Gospel. In the afterglow of the Feeding of Five Thousand, we can well imagine that the disciples would have been more than happy to sit back and relax

(gathering up twelve baskets of bread and fish leftovers is tiring work!) I love the depiction of the miracle in the film, Jesus of Nazareth, so full of energy and people laughing, cheering, eating, bread flying around everywhere! But more than the physical labor, there must have been, after this event, a kind of “Phew!” period for the Twelve. But, Jesus, in effect, conveys the message: *“Can’t sit here resting on our laurels. No time to dilly-dally. Places to go, people to see, things to do. Let’s get cracking!”*

So, off they go, these twelve, by now, friends. At least four of them — Peter, James, John and Andrew — (a third of the complement) were experienced fishermen, accustomed to the lake and its quirks. If there were signs of impending bad weather, they would have noticed, but perhaps it caused them no great concern. It doesn’t take long for them to be in some trouble (every parent knows this; you look away for just a second . . .) So by evening (remember Jesus fed the multitude because *“the hour was late”* . . . so minutes, rather than hours later) the disciples have encountered a storm.

Are we to understand this metaphorically? Is Matthew portraying for us the “storms” that come bursting onto our lives — the sudden illness or injury . . . the auto accident that leaves us incapacitated . . . the loss of a job — is this what this is about? Yes and no. The Twelve were in a boat that was taking a pretty nasty licking from the wind and waves. This was no metaphor for them. But we too get *“battered by the waves”* in all of life’s inventive ways.

Jesus had gone off by Himself to pray. He spent the entire night in prayer (apparently), leaving the disciples to fend for themselves.

Let me pause here just a moment to address the issue of self-sufficiency. I made a point of saying that at least a third of the company of apostles knew their way around a boat and this body of water. Now, I will allow that even the most seasoned mariner can “get in over his head” (literally and figuratively) — consider Gordon Lightfoot’s song, “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” or the book and movie, “The Perfect Storm.” Yet I have heard people complain about this story (and others in the Bible)

with such questions as, “Where was Jesus?” Even the disciples (according to Mark, relating a different storm) cried out to Jesus, ***“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”*** As we shall see, Jesus has the control necessary; but there are times when He sets us free to function with what He knows we can do.

So here are the Twelve, in the boat, tossed back and forth, maybe some of them had already lost the bread and fish they had eaten along with the 5,000. And Jesus comes at dawn walking on the water — the big show-off. *“Look what I can do!”* You know, in essence that’s what we’re saying when we mouth things like, *“Well excuse me for not being God.”* The Twelve (here’s an issue of faith!) can’t believe their eyes. ***“It is a ghost!”*** (the Greek word is Φαντασμα (phantasma) and for some reason it is capitalized “It’s THE ghost” ???)

Now . . . pay very close attention to Jesus’ words here — Φαρσειτε, εγω ειμι, μη φοβεισθε (pharsayte, ego eimi, may phobeisthe) — ***“Take heart (have courage), it is I; do not be afraid.”*** Now, I said it in Greek, let me take a stab at saying it in Hebrew, which may be closer to Jesus’ own Aramaic: *Amats, yahweh, chil.* (Ooh, I like that usage — chil, cool it. Jesus, very “Fonzy”). Okay, a little showing off with the Biblical languages — but I hope you could hear, especially in the Hebrew, the center of that word from Jesus: “Yahweh.” “I am.”

We are inclined to hear Peter’s response to Jesus as *“I’m not sure it really is you, Jesus.”* What Peter is really saying is more like this: *“Okay, you’re the ‘I Am?’ Show me. Let me do something I really cannot do.”* This, in our ignorance, we call “faith.” Jesus calls it “little faith.” *“Hold on, Pastor,”* you want to say, *“Jesus didn’t say that until after Peter sank and cried out.”*

Wrong. This whole thing is “little faith.” The fear at “the ghost,” the failure to see Jesus as Jesus, the desire for proof, the eyes directed toward, the fears, the sinking, the crying out, the hand outstretched to take Jesus’ hand, the climbing back into the boat, the awe of all the disciples— all of it is “little faith”

*“My lands, Pastor! Then what in the world could be ‘big faith.’” I don’t know — all I got is little faith. But it seems to be something like this. . . Eugene Boring writes: “The message is not ‘If he had enough faith, he could have walked on the water, just as the message to us is not ‘If we had enough faith, we could overcome all our problems in spectacular ways.’ This interpretation is wrong in that it identifies faith with spectacular exceptions to the warp and woof of our ordinary days, days that are all subject to the laws of physics and biology. This is wrong because when our fantasies of overcoming this web are shattered by the realities of accident, disease, aging, and circumstance and we begin to sink, this view encourages us to feel guilt because of our ‘lack of faith.’ What if the message of this text were ‘If he had had enough faith, he would have believed the word of Jesus that came to him in the boat as mediating the presence and reality of God’? Faith is not being able to walk on the water — only God can do that — but daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence, that God is with us in the boat, made real in the community of faith as it makes its way through the storm, battered by the waves.”*

We would like to believe that faith has to be big to work. Nope. All that is necessary for faith to be faith is that we take God at His word. *“But, Pastor . . .”* no . . . *“All that is necessary for faith to be faith is that we take God at His word.”* *“Gee, I can do that!”* Can you? Can you really? Not on your own, you can’t.

Which really seems to be the point of this entire narrative. It’s not about doing spectacular things that cause yourself and/or others to go, *“Wow!”* It’s all about letting God’s voice enter in deeply. Not *“Wow!”* but *“Whew”* as the presence of God, the voice of Jesus, the indwelling of the Spirit begin to take shape and to shape you.

Richard Jensen says it this way: *“The person of faith is the one who cries out to Jesus in time of need . . . Our rational minds push for one or the other. Either the disciples are men of unbelief or they are men of great faith. That’s logical. Logical, perhaps, but not true to life. We think of our*

*own lives. Sometimes we believe. Sometimes we have 'little faith.'*”

Please note how Matthew ends the story. Matthew tells us: **“those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”** which includes now also Peter, who doubted. If you go the very end of Matthew’s Gospel, you find the resurrected — the resurrected, mind you! — Jesus on a hill with these selfsame disciples. Matthew tells us: **“When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.”** *“Aw, man. What is it with you guys? What’s left to doubt?”*

Well, it’s this “little faith” thing always there on the horizon, always sneaking into the boat with us. *“What will happen now? What does God want from me? What am I supposed to do? How can I do that?”* Those are all “little faith” questions. Jesus says to us again and again and again: *“Have courage. I Am. Don’t be afraid.”* Take what little faith you may think you have and give it to Him. Give it all. That takes guts, I know. Do it anyhow.

His hand reaches out to you. In over your head in the sea, in the boat, on dry land, highest mountain, deepest valley, in the storm, in the calm . . . now’s the time, “little faith,” this is the place.

***“The LORD gives His people strength. The LORD blesses them with peace.”*** Psalm 29:11

Amen.