

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 19 (A)
August 9, 2020
Text: Matthew 14:22-33

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If there was ever a Bible story that matched how I feel right now, it's our gospel story for today, with the disciples in their boat, battered by the wind and waves. And I wonder if you feel the same way. The storm and the deep water seem to suggest the powers of chaos and destruction threatening all around. And that's exactly where we all are—threatened by the global chaos of the pandemic, as well as national chaos and local chaos, maybe even familial chaos, internal chaos. It's not hard at all to match our feelings with how the disciples must have felt as the pounding waves punished their little boat.

We're in luck, then, because our gospel story seems specifically written to speak to our anxiety, our fear and uncertainty. In a way, the story seems unreal, even almost magical. Exhausted from a night as sea, being assaulted by the storm and afraid for their lives, the disciples saw a shocking and unsettling sight—a figure walking toward them on the water. And they knew what you and I know, which is that people don't walk on water. So they assumed it must be a ghost, some terrible phantasm, with who knows what kind of malevolent power and intentions. But it wasn't a ghost. It was Jesus, who came to them over the waves. He called to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Walking on water—it's a truly amazing image, an archetypal image, for transcending the limits of our human experience. It evokes not being weighed down by the things that pull at us and make us afraid; not being dragged under by worries or fears, but rising above. So of course Jesus, as Son of God, the One who is God with us, Jesus walks on water. But so does Peter. And that's what I find most interesting and intriguing about this story. Even if it's only for a moment, even if it appears to end in failure, Peter walks on water. And really, his attempt doesn't end in failure. It ends in being saved by Jesus. And I believe Matthew wants us to see ourselves, as we seek to obey Jesus' call to us, reflected in Peter. This is Matthew's meditation on learning from and obeying Jesus.

At its heart, this story is about two things: the second is our faith, our trust in Jesus, but the first and most important is Jesus' power to save, to deliver us from those things that would overwhelm us and take us down. And this story reminds us that faith doesn't start with us. Faith isn't our project. It isn't our job to work up enough faith or the right kind of faith. Faith begins with Jesus showing himself to us as one who is worthy of our trust. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Faith is simply our response of recognizing Jesus as the one who is able to do what we can't. Jesus can rise above and not be dragged under. Jesus shows us the way of life and not death. Faith is what happens when we open our hearts to Jesus as the one who has the life that we long for. Faith is when we call out, "Lord, command me!" Show me your way.

And here's what faith looks like. Faith means trusting and embracing everything that Jesus is and does. Faith means trusting and embracing Jesus' way of loving God with our whole heart and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Faith means trusting and embracing Jesus' way of

compassion and humility and generosity. Faith means trusting and embracing Jesus' way of forgiveness and love of enemies. In other words, faith is unavoidably connected to discipleship, following Jesus as teacher and Lord. Or to use the imagery of our story, faith is when, hearing Jesus say to him, "Come," Peter gets out of the boat and walks on the water. Peter rises above and is not dragged under. That's what Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness is all about—Jesus shows us a life so beautiful, so free and joyful, that we can't help but want it for ourselves. At the same time, it may feel risky to prioritize generosity and forgiving. It may feel risky—like I'm sure getting out of the boat did to Peter—to get out of our safe places to use our privilege to benefit neighbors who are vulnerable. But Jesus shows us a life that is not dragged under by greed or self-centeredness, not dragged under by bitterness or resentment, not dragged under by fear or worry or anxiety. Jesus walks lightly over the waves, transcending all that would diminish life and make it less than the good gift God gives. And Jesus calls to us, "Come."

And if it were only so easy! Our hearts say "Yes, we want to rise above and not be dragged under." We want to entrust our whole selves to Jesus and his way of love. But, like Peter, the wind and the waves are swirling all around. The chaos is always right there in front of us, demanding our attention. The chaos calls us to be afraid, and the agents of chaos in our world call us to be very afraid. They tell us to be afraid of those who are different from us, or build a wall between us and our neighbors so we can't be hurt. They tell us to always make sure we take care of our own needs and wants first—because that's the way to be happy. And with the storm pounding in our ears, it's hard to not be distracted by it all, unsettled by it all. It's hard to not become afraid, and then start to act out of fear. And like Peter, we find that when we're distracted and afraid, we're no longer rising above. Instead we're drowning in the chaos, and we're going down.

But here's the thing. The story doesn't end with Peter going down, and it doesn't end with us going down either. Peter calls out to Jesus, "Lord, save me." And Jesus does, because he is the Son of God. He is God with us, who meets us with grace and mercy and forgiveness, and a second chance. That's just what the life of following Jesus looks like. This story isn't really about Peter's failure. He walked on water! This story is about having a little bit of faith, and acting on it. Jesus is the one who has been through death and the grave, and now lives a resurrection life, and we can be confident that he can save us. That doesn't mean that the storm around us will necessarily stop right now—no matter how much we might wish for that. Jesus' saving power doesn't mean that life won't be hard, that we won't go through fearful and painful times. But this is the hope, the truth, we cling to. Jesus' way of love is the only thing that brings sense and beauty and order to this chaotic world. Jesus' way of love is the only thing that can bring true peace and joy to our fearful hearts. No matter how often we may fail at following Jesus' way of love, he is always there with an outstretched arm to forgive and embrace us again with his love. And in the end, he will carry us with him, through death and the grave, into a new life, where there is only peace, only joy, only love. Thanks be to God. Amen.