

August 6 7, 2011
8th Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 14:22 – 33
Do Not Be Afraid

“Do not be afraid.” That phrase is spoken 59 times in the Bible. Then and now, God knows that fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith. That we are easily intimidated by fear, and let it make decisions in our lives. The good news in today’s reading, and every day, is that even when we let fear take over, Jesus is right there to catch us, to be real to us. Today’s story gives us the opportunity to examine ourselves, as individuals and as a church, to see whether we’re living by fear or by faith, whether or not we trust Jesus’ presence.

This week’s gospel lesson follows directly from last week’s reading. After preaching to and feeding those 10,000 or so people, Jesus put the disciples in a boat, waved good-bye, sent them on their way, and he went into the hills for the night to be by himself, to be with God. Remember, that’s what he’d set out to do, to grieve his cousin John the Baptist’s beheading, when all the crowds followed him and he had compassion on them and cured them of their illnesses, and fed them God’s word, and bread and fish. In today’s reading he finally has that important time alone, with God, to pray and to grieve. Early the next morning Jesus went back to Lake Genassaret, the Sea of Galilee, and found that the wind had carried the disciples and their boat out into the lake.

From Genesis to Revelation the sea is a powerful symbol. It represents chaos, danger, and mystery. In the creation stories, God separated the waters from the water, pushing them back, pushing back the chaos, calling the dry land, the good stuff, into being. From Noah to the Psalms, deep waters were a symbol for the chaotic forces of darkness and evil which threatened to overwhelm God’s people. And in Revelation, where John of Patmos describes an amazing vision of a new heaven and a new earth, he makes it clear that in that new heaven and new earth, the sea would be no more. Life would be safe and peaceful. So for Jesus’ Jewish followers, and for Matthew’s Jewish readers, this story had powerful meaning. Jesus can walk on the sea! He was not afraid of its evil power, its darkness. He must be connected to God, because he could walk right over danger and chaos!

Back to the boat full of disciples. Peter, having figured out that this ghostly figure in the early morning mist was Jesus walking on the water, conquering the dangerous sea, wanted to do it,

too. And Jesus encouraged him. Called his name. Reached out to him. And Matthew tells us that Peter did o.k. for the first few steps, until the sound of the wind distracted him and he started to sink. Jesus pulled him up out of the sea, the chaos, the darkness, the danger, and together they got back in the boat.

The boat. It's another powerful symbol in today's reading. In the early church the boat was a symbol of their community. As a minority often persecuted by the government and culture, they saw themselves together on a boat in that sea of trouble. Today the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical organizations use a boat, with the cross as the mast, as a logo. The rafters of our church and other churches are meant to mimic a boat and call on this symbolism. Le Corbusier was a 20th century architect, and someday I'll go to the church he designed in France that is shaped like a boat. It's a different kind of symbol for what church is than our fortress like structure. In today's gospel story, being in the boat together as a community is a good thing, and taking the risk of stepping out of the boat, is also a good thing. The boat, their community of disciples and teacher; was a refuge in the storm, a place of security. But the outside world wasn't to be ignored. Jesus encouraged Peter to venture out into it. And he caught Peter when his fear got the better of him.

When was the last time you ventured out of your comfort zone? Heard Jesus ask you to do something risky, then trusted him, held his hand, put your heart in his, and stepped out of your familiar boat onto the chaotic, unfamiliar seas? Do you remember that feeling the first time you jumped off the high dive as a kid? Or galloped flat out on a horse? Or rode your bike like the wind down a steep hill? Or as an adult, starting your dream job you weren't at all sure you could do – and surprising yourself at how well you did, traveling somewhere so foreign it was scary – then having a great time; that feeling of fear before your first child arrived – could you be a good parent? I worry that as adult followers of Jesus, in our often comfortable lives; we don't push ourselves often enough to experience the exhilaration and joy of walking on water with Jesus, conquering the fear and chaos and danger with him, trusting that he will catch us if we fall. I worry that we don't even let ourselves get close to thinking about stepping out of the boat. Sometimes we're forced into getting out of the boat. Losing a job, the end of a marriage, a serious illness. None of us are totally safe from the chaos of the sea of life we're floating on. For those of us who've been pushed out of the boat, how'd you do? Did you keep your eyes on Jesus? Did you let him catch you or did you tough it out yourself, all alone, not knowing the security and joy Jesus has to offer? Some of us have spent a long time at the bottom of the

sea, just holding our breath, forgetting to reconnect with our faith, with God's love, too stubborn or proud to let Jesus catch us. Most us just play it safe and decide not to take a risk in the first place.

How about as a church? How often do we get out of the boat, leave the security of our buildings, the security of "the way we've always done it" and depend only on Jesus? When services went from German to English must have been quite a risk. Surely when Rev. Miller was arrested, you found yourselves very involuntarily on stormy seas. So stormy it was almost impossible to find Jesus in the fog. But with time, you again found Jesus and recentered this church on him. Mission trips are great examples of Bethlehem having the courage to leave the boat, hold on to Jesus, and conquer stormy seas. That's why people get addicted to mission trips; that great adrenaline rush. Tutoring at Howard Roosa and cooking at the shelter requires walking on water courage. If we didn't have Jesus with us, we probably wouldn't do it. And when we do conquer those fears, our lives are so much richer. What might this church look like if we intentionally spent time in prayer as a group, listening for Jesus to say to us, "Come," like he did to Peter, and then have the courage to leave the security of this wonderful boat? If we took more risks on the world's stormy seas, where Jesus needs us, and let our faith know the joy of that high dive adrenaline rush, doing the impossible together as servants of the living Christ? Just as Jesus called Peter out of the boat to follow him, he calls us to pray our way through our fears, take risks, and find ourselves walking on water, doing something we never imagined we could do, because we choose to leave fear and comfort behind, and instead keep our eyes on Jesus and trust that he's always there, even in the deep and dangerous waters.

The Gospel reading tells us that Jesus could walk on water because he stayed connected to God through prayer. And that as long as Peter stayed focused on Jesus, he was able to do the impossible. But when Peter let his fear take over, the chaos, the darkness overwhelmed him. The sea began to swallow him and Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. That's kind of what Peter's life as a disciple was like. Two steps forward, one step back. Two steps back, one step forward. Sound familiar? Most churches do a good job of following Jesus as we take care of one another in the safe, familiar confines of our boats, our churches. But we won't ever fully know the incredible freedom and joy of faith unless we step out of the boat, and together conquer the impossible, change the world, with Gods' help, with Jesus' vision for what human life could look like.

Have you seen David Letterman's recurring skit, "Will it float?" Up goes the stage curtain at the Ed Sullivan theatre in New York City, and there is a 6 or 8 foot round, maybe 5 foot high clear tank of water. Some common object is presented. A skateboard. A bag of potatoes. A gallon jug of milk. David and his band leader, Paul, each predict whether that night's object will float, or not. Then Dave's beautiful fantasy ladies put the object in the tank, with much fanfare and the "Will it float?" theme song, and we get the verdict. The object sinks or it floats. Today's gospel reading gives us the same test. If put on the dangerous waters of life, leaving the comfort zones of our lives, of our churches, will we sink or will we stay connected to Jesus? Will we float or will we sink?

Living between faith and fear. That's our reality as followers of the risen Christ. We don't have to ever sink. That's today's gospel. Jesus will catch us, so what's to lose if we step out of the boat? Keep this Sabbath's good news with you this day and in the days to come, so that when you feel the winds of fear threaten to rule your life, think about Peter on that water, starting to sink. Look for, feel for, close your eyes and see that strong and gentle hand reaching for you, that peace of Christ that passes all understanding, and let it carry you above your fears. And may we know that when we start to sin, with humble and thankful hearts, the living Christ can pull us up to walk on water again. As individuals and as a church, prayer is what gives us the ability to walk on water with Jesus.

Let us join our hearts with God's in prayer.

Thank you God, for today's good news. Jesus will walk on water to save us. Jesus is the one who calls to us to brave stormy seas of chaos with his help. Jesus is the one who pulls us back into the boat if we lose our way. God, here we are in this boat, the church we love, in scary in-between times, so keep our eyes and hearts fixed on you. Give us the courage to walk on water with Jesus, and the sense to get back in the boat with him when we lose our way. Amen.