

ELCG Devotional Activity

10th Sunday after Pentecost
Week of 9 August 2020

Faith in the Midst of the Storm

In this familiar story from Matthew's gospel, Jesus miraculously walks on water as the disciples are caught in the midst of a tumultuous storm on the Sea of Galilee. Peter responds with an enthusiastic though imperfect faith, and the disciples' fear is transformed into a testimony of praise.

In this week's devotional, we are reassured of Christ's presence with us in the midst of struggle.

Scripture

Immediately [Jesus] 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, he 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.' He 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 him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.' (Matthew 14:22-33)



Fresco painting in the chancel of L'église Saint Pancrace, Yvoire, France (Henri Modena, 1951)

Reflection

Countless sermons have been preached on this passage urging believers to learn from Peter's "failure" to keep his eyes on Christ as he stepped out of that boat. The

admonishments sound something like this: “He took his eyes off of Jesus, which caused him to sink. He allowed himself to get distracted by everything going on around him. Doubts crept into his heart. He lost his focus, he failed, his faith was weak...” The message to “Keep your eyes on Jesus” is, indeed, an important one for all of us as followers of Christ. But rather than being a cautionary tale about faith that is not strong enough to stay the course, perhaps the lesson we learn from Peter’s encounter with Jesus in the midst of the storm can be one of encouragement and grace.

The disciples had spent hours bearing up through the tumultuous storm overtaking their boat on the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus appears walking on the water towards them, speaking the words that bring reassurance and peace: “Take heart. It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Once Peter recognizes it is Jesus speaking, he responds with reckless abandon and a child-like enthusiasm. He asks Jesus to enable him to walk on the water towards him, and Jesus invites him to come. For a few, brief steps, Peter *does* walk on the water before he falters and pleads with Christ to save him.

To be afraid and to doubt in the face of danger is to be human. Not to mention, that it is not humanly possible to walk on water. To expect Peter (or anyone) to not fear and to not doubt is a far more impossible task than the steps that Peter actually took on the sea.

We do not know for sure the tone of Jesus’ voice as he asks Peter, “Why did you doubt?” But perhaps Jesus is speaking as friends do, with a teasing warmth in his voice. Knowing Peter’s limitations – his humanity – perhaps Jesus’ words were not as much scolding as they were encouraging, “You were doing it! You had it! Keep at it!”

Peter’s relationship with Jesus was grounded in love. Peter trusted Jesus enough to step out of the boat to attempt what is humanly impossible. And just as importantly, in faith he cried out to Jesus for help when he was sinking – taking hold of Christ’s hand to lift him up again to safety. Although he wavered, Peter was the only one of the disciples on board whose faith compelled them to take a risk to step out of the boat. Yes, Peter’s faith was imperfect – but is not mine? Is not yours? Peter took a risk of faith, and he trusted Jesus enough to see him through. There is grace in the attempt – it is not success that matters, but trust.

Peter’s encounter with Jesus on the stormy Sea of Galilee offers us encouragement and assurance that we need as we face the tumults and storms in life. For those times when we struggle, feeling as if we, too, are on a boat being battered by the waves and winds of a storm. As we search for guidance in the midst of challenging circumstances. As we face tasks that seem impossible or that we lack in resources to carry out. As we feel overwhelmed by stress or illness or uncertainty. As we grieve the loss of one beloved to us...

We can take refuge in hearing Jesus’ words of reassurance seep into our souls: “Take heart. It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Jesus reaches out his hand to catch and sustain us – through the love of family or friends, through prayer and other spiritual practices, through the bonds of the faith community, and through those moments of peace that surpass our understanding, even in the presence of the struggle.

God does not demand perfect faith or perfect trust – we are loved with our doubts and wavering. With our eyes toward Jesus, we can step out in faith, knowing that Jesus' outstretched hand is ready to grasp us should we falter.

Questions for Reflection

What does that boat represent for you? Is there a struggle or hardship that causes you to feel as if you are in the midst of a tumultuous storm?

What are the "comfort zones" that you are afraid to step out of? Is there something Christ is calling you to consider differently? What do you have to entrust to Christ in order to respond faithfully?

Reflecting back on your journey of faith, what other "storms" have you gone through? How did you experience Christ's presence in their midst?

Is there someone in your life who is facing a stormy season, to whom you can offer a compassionate hand? How can you offer Christ's love for someone who is struggling?

Prayer

Sing – or speak – or listen to – the lovely hymn, "My Life Flows On In Endless Song,"* which was part of our Sunday worship.

*(Vs 1) My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentations
I catch the sweet though far off hymn that hails a new creation*

*(Chorus) No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?*

*(Vs 2) Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing...
it finds an echo in my soul, how can I keep from singing?*

*(Vs 3) What though my joys and comforts die? I know my Savior liveth.
What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth.*

*(Vs 4) The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing!
All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?*

* This hymn is also known as "How Can I Keep From Singing."
There are many versions and styles available for listening online.
For a version sung by Enya (with some alternate verses), click here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RHt3EIEvHQ>