

Hear The Word, Not The Wind

Matthew 14:22-33

August 10, 2008

I.

Today's Gospel about Jesus and Peter on the lake is the second part of a two part story that began last week with the feeding of the five thousand. These two events are separated by a week in our time. In the Bible they occurred only a few hours apart.

Last week we heard about a crowd that needed food, and Jesus told the disciples "You do it, you feed them." But that story also showed they could not do it without him. God's power working through Jesus was necessary for the disciples to have enough food. This week we continue with the idea that the disciples needed Jesus' help, and today we heard an example of what that meant for Peter.

In some ways these two readings summarize living a Christian life. We know we must make decisions and do many things for ourselves in the world. But we also know, as the disciples discovered last week, that there are some things we just cannot do without Jesus.

Today's reading closes the circle. It describes one of the ways Jesus helps us during these times. We learn, as Peter learned, that Jesus can reach out and save us when we listen to the wind and start to sink. It helps us understand how he can save us in this world, as well as the next.

II.

Today I want to focus on Peter and his role in the story. But first I would like to set the stage by pointing out that the disciples were terrified. Why was that? Was it the weather? These disciples were familiar with the Sea of Galilee. Some of them were fishermen before Jesus called them to follow him. So a storm should not have been a big problem. They were used to unusual weather.

But if we look closely, we see that they were not terrified of the storm, but rather of the appearance of Jesus walking across the water. They did not know what they were witnessing. They thought he was a ghost. They just did not understand.

As I thought about how the disciples in the boat did not recognize Jesus walking on water I recalled a story about some duck hunters up in the Delta, where some of the best duck hunting in the country can be found.

It seems there was a hunter who had a most unusual dog. He couldn't believe how good this dog was as a retriever, and he wanted his friends to see the dog in action. So he arranged a hunting trip with some of them.

Well, they went out and built their blinds so the ducks would not see them and, of course, this special dog was there, waiting. After a while a flock of ducks flew over, and they all raised their shotguns and fired. Several ducks fell from the sky.

Now was the time for the dog to do his work, and so the fellow gave the command, and the dog just stepped out onto the lake and walked on the water to fetch the first duck, and brought it back. Then he did the same thing several more times. He just walked out on the lake, and retrieved the birds and walked back until all of them had been recovered.

After this was finished the hunter who owned the dog felt pretty good, and he turned to his buddies, and said, "Say, did you notice anything unusual about my dog? One of the fellows thought a while, and then said, "Yeah, that dog can't swim, can he?"

This story shows us, in a humorous way, that sometimes people just don't grasp what's happening right before their eyes. In the same way, the disciples, in their fear of what they thought they were seeing, missed the reality of who was coming toward them until Jesus identified himself.

III.

Let's pick up the reading at that point. Upon learning that it really was Jesus out there Peter immediately reacted in faith in his own typical way. He said, "If it's you Lord, tell me to come," and Jesus did so. And while we might wonder why Peter tested Jesus, we see that his faith was strong enough, at least in the beginning, that he trusted Jesus to enable him to walk on water.

And at first things seemed to be going OK, but then what happened? As Peter began to walk on the water he lost his focus. He turned away from Jesus and started to pay attention to the wind whipping around him. His faith failed him and in that moment the power was broken. He started to sink. But even though Peter's faith had been diminished by fear, he still called out to Jesus, "Lord, save me."

And what Jesus did for Peter that night on the lake foreshadowed in some ways what he soon would do for all humanity on the cross. He reached out to Peter when he cried out, held him up, brought him safely back to the boat.

Jesus also said something to Peter. He asked, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" What does this mean? Note here that Jesus did not say Peter had no faith. His meaning was that Peter's doubts about the wind interfered with his faith and weakened the power that Jesus had given him.

Peter stepped out in faith and began to do something he thought was not possible. Then he allowed his attention to shift to worldly things. He began by believing that Jesus could enable him to walk on water. But when he actually got out there he forgot the miracle and remembered reality. And he probably thought something else to himself, perhaps the Hebrew equivalent of one of the most frequently spoken words on American golf courses.

Sometimes we do the same thing. Just as we put our problems at the foot of the cross, but cannot resist the temptation to grab them back again, Peter also could not resist thinking about the dangers of the storm rather than the sanctuary offered by his Lord.

That is one of the teachings of this lesson. We cannot truly step out in faith if we then start calculating the odds of whether or not it will work. And we cannot continue to walk in faith if we always look to the world and take our eyes off the Lord. Trust in the Lord has a simple definition. It means trust in the Lord.

IV.

Peter's story describes the human condition. In some way or another, at some time or another, we all will be caught between faith and doubt. It's unavoidable. And in an instant we can falter and fail. It can be a moment of anger, or greed, or prideful arrogance, or a moral lapse. It can be something that hurts someone else, or it can be something known only to us—and to God—that separates us from godly obedience.

Individuals struggling with addictions of all types know what that's like. You are going along fine, working the program, and then "whammo!" You slip one time and out of nowhere you start to sink into the sea. And that is the way life is. It's that way in twelve step programs, and it's that way for everyone, no matter what we are doing or where we are going.

At sometime or another, in one way or another, we all, like Peter, will take our eyes off Jesus and start to listen to the wind. In that moment we will start to sink, and that is when we have to reach out to Jesus and say "save me." And the good news is, we know he always will.

I used to do a lot of prison ministry in Virginia, and one of the stories of that ministry is about an old Baptist preacher talking to a group of inmates. He took a crisp new \$100 bill out of his pocket, and asked the prisoners who wanted it. Just about everybody's hand shot up.

Then he took the bill and crumpled it up in his hand, and asked who wanted it. The same hands went up. Then he took the bill, put it on the floor, stepped on it and ground his heel into it. He picked it up and asked now if anyone wanted it, and still everybody's hand went up.

"This is an important lesson," the old preacher said. "No matter what happened to this bill, it's still worth \$100. It didn't lose any of its value." Then he said, "The same applies to you. No matter how much you have been crumpled up, stepped on, or ground into the floor, you have not lost any of your value. You are worth exactly as much to God today as you were the day you were born."

That applies to all of us. We all are of infinite value to God if we trust in him. We all face storms in this world, but our value to God never diminishes whether the storms are of our own making or beyond our control. We all from time to time silently ask ourselves, "Why did I do that?" or "How am I going to get through this?" And if we dare to believe that God is with us as we make our way through the wind and the waves, then our faith is real even though we can fall into doubts.

God wants our faith because he loves us. But more importantly, and more to the point, he accepts our doubts as he builds us back up. Just as with Peter, if we sincerely ask him, he brings us back to the boat when we listen to the wind, and it is in that love for us that we, like Peter, are saved.

V.

Peter's story is our story. It is the story of God's disciples throughout the centuries, and it clearly describes what it means to be a Christian caught between faith and doubt. When Peter doubted he called to Jesus to save him. He did not turn away.

We also have been launched into the storms that trouble this fallen world. And we find that we cannot complete the voyage without God's sustaining power. We cannot hear the Word if we are listening to the wind. And Jesus cannot save us if we don't reach out to him.

God's power through our Lord and Savior makes itself known in calling us to faith, and it shores us up when our faith is tested. Peter started to walk on the water because of that power. And he started to sink because of his weakness, which our Lord helped him overcome.

So, to us, as with Peter, when we believe, God gives us power. And to us, as with Peter, when we doubt or fear, God stretches out his saving hand. *Amen.*