

Pentecost 13
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I have heard many jokes over the years about walking on water. Have you heard that the river is so polluted that an atheist can walk across it? The joke people love to tell me is about the clergy. A priest, a minister and a rabbi went fishing. After a time they were running out of ice and since it was a hot day the priest said, "I'll go get some more ice." He got out of the boat, walked across the water and returned with ice. They kept on fishing for a time when the minister noticed they were out of sandwiches. "I'll go see what else I can find for us to eat." He got out of the boat, walked across the water and returned with a bag of food. As the day wore on the rabbi noticed they were out of bait. "I'll go and get some more bait," he said. He got out of the boat and sank. The priest turned to the minister and said, "Think we should have told him where the rocks are?"

This morning we hear the continuation of a story about Jesus and his disciples. Jesus has gone apart to collect his thoughts and be still with God. A crowd of people follow him and he has compassion on them. He heals their sick, he teaches them and prays with them. Evening is approaching and the disciples want to send the people away to the towns and villages to buy food for themselves. Jesus takes the disciples' offering of five loaves and two fish and feeds thousands of people. He now dismisses the crowds and sends his disciples across the lake ahead of him. Finally time to just be still, to catch his breath and be present with God.

The disciples get in a boat and begin to move across the lake. They must have been inspired and exhausted by what they had just witnessed. It was amazing to watch Jesus ministering to the crowd. Then to share in the feeding of thousands and gather a basket of leftovers from such a meager offering had to be a mystical experience. What a day it has been!

While feeling comfortable as they begin to move across the lake, the winds pick up and the boat begins to move up and down, back and forth in alarming ways. The sails of the boat are stretched. The waves start coming over the sides, the clouds become very dark. Some of the disciples are fishermen so they know when to be alarmed.

As the first light of dawn begins to creep over the eastern horizon Jesus begins to walk across the lake toward the boat. The disciples are already emotionally exhausted and physically tired, the sight of Jesus coming toward them frightens them. "It is a ghost," they cry out in fear. Jesus tries to calm them by identifying himself. "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."

Peter, the disciple who quickly responds to Jesus throughout his ministry, recognizes Jesus and asks to meet him. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." "Come." Jesus says. Peter totally trusts Jesus. He leaves the safety of the boat and begins to walk across the water. With his eyes locked on Jesus, Peter is doing the unthinkable.

Then what happens? The wind picks up. Peter becomes alarmed and looks away from Jesus. When he does he begins to sink. Life can be like that. Circumstances of our lives can be like a strong wind that blows pushing us back and forth.

We want to be faithful people but it is difficult at times to keep our eyes focused on Jesus while getting buffeted about. Life gets in the way of our faith and we become afraid of drowning.

How is your relationship with the people at work, at home, in your family, among your friends, with your significant other? Are you feeling so pressured by the demands of your life that you cannot breathe? Have things gotten so out of control that you feel overwhelmed and hopeless?

Peter was feeling overwhelmed and helpless. He cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "Peter did you have so little faith that you thought I would let you drown? Why did you doubt?"

Why do we doubt? We doubt because we become so absorbed with the struggles of our lives that we lose sight of God who loves and cares for each one of us. It is all too easy to allow the circumstances of life to distance us from God. Sometimes we become so overwhelmed that we wonder if God is but an illusion, a ghost.

After all we are human. God never gives up on us, even when we are feeling overwhelmed. God is there for us when we have lost our way or lost someone important in our lives. "I am with you always even unto the end."

John Wesley was traveling on a storm swept ship toward his destination in Savannah, Georgia. He writes in his journal that he discovered for the first time his own fear and lack of preparation to face death. He was impressed with the Moravian families on board who faced the storm and imminent threat of drowning with a sense of calm he did not know. Wesley wrote that that experience on the sea launched his personal confidence in God's forgiveness and salvation. Those stormy seas helped fuel the eighteenth century Pietism that led to the Methodist movement in this country.

We like to think the miracle was Jesus walking on the water across the lake to meet his disciples. But, the real miracle in this story is that Peter got out of the boat and walked across the water toward Jesus. We expect Jesus to do miraculous things. Peter is not the Son of God crossing the deep, no, Peter is an average guy just like you and me. Peter is an impulsive, questioning fisherman with all sorts of concerns and issues. He walks on the water toward Jesus. Now that is a miracle!

Perhaps following Jesus is really always like that. We see the value of what Jesus teaches, we want the life he describes, we acknowledge the value of the community of faith. To achieve that life for ourselves means stepping out of the boat onto scary waters. Perhaps a good indication of the integrity of our faith and the ministries we share as a congregation is that they take us into waters where we cry out, "Lord, save us."

More and more Jesus calls us to venture into places where all we have to save us when fear strikes is the hand of Jesus. May we reach out and take that hand in trust knowing God's presence is with us always even in the face of fear.