

<i>Date Preached</i>	09-Aug-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	02-Jul-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Pr 14, Yr A (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>	Mt 14:22-33		
<i>Newsletter</i>			

" But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; *do not be afraid.*' ... And those in the boat worshiped Him, saying, 'Truly you *are* the Son of God. '"



A few weeks ago, Jim and I were in an antique shop up in Maine. An oddly shaped contraption hanging on the wall caught my attention: it looked kind of like a large, flat wooden wrench, but with some very pronounced curves in it. Instead of holding onto my curiosity, I said to myself, "Oh, this must have been some sort of primitive tool to move railroad switches back in the day." (Really? Now, there's an insight into how my mind works!). As I moved closer to the object, I could make out on the price tag the word "sailboat." So then I thought, oh, of course, this is part of a rudder that once steered a sailboat—mystery solved. It was only when I got close enough to read the entire description that I discovered, to my private chagrin, that this was, in fact, a boat-building tool—a form used to hold the planks of the hull in place while it was being built.

Now, on one level, this was an inconsequential—silly, even—error of leaping to a conclusion: no harm, no foul. But on another level, it illuminates a greater, more serious flaw in perspective. Upon seeing something I didn't recognize, I immediately sought to identify it by boxing into categories of things I already knew ... rather than *living into* my unknowing and allowing the mystery to teach me a new way of seeing; to give me a new understanding.

I would argue that this is the same issue the disciples confront in the first half of our Gospel lesson this morning. They are in a boat, without Jesus, out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. In those darkest hours of pre-dawn, waves are battering the boat and the wind is preventing them from getting to shore. Although several among them are fishermen by trade, their current circumstance seems beyond their collective experience, and they are in distress. Amid this peril and helplessness, they see something coming toward them on the water. They leap to the conclusion that this is some sort of ghost, an apparition, and it "terrifie[s]" them.

Now, we really shouldn't take the disciples too much to task for thinking they saw a ghost. Belief in spirits and demons was commonplace in their culture. But, I would argue, how they react to seeing Jesus on the surface of the sea is still problematic: an example of what we might now call confirmation bias, which is the human tendency to interpret new information in a way that confirms what we already know or believe—of jumping to the conclusion that this object *must* be some crazy railroad wrench, rather than allowing the possibility of another way to see things.

For, in fact, another reality *does* exist, but the disciples are just slow on the uptake. They have just left Jesus after witnessing Him feed thousands of people from five loaves and two fish and cure all the sick who thronged about Him. They have heard Him preach, thus far in Matthew, not one or two, but *three* discourses about the plan of God and God's Kingdom—and how divergent that is from the ways of the world they know. And they *themselves* have already been given by Jesus the

authority to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers [and] cast out demons" (Mt 10:8). They have seen and know Jesus up-close and personal; have seen Him work miracles and proclaim the pathway to salvation ... and yet ... in the moment of crisis or fear ... just when Jesus could help them most ... the disciples seem to forget everything they know about Him and His message, and fall back to seeing the 'new' of Jesus according to the 'old' ways they've learned from the world. Faith may come easily on sunny afternoons, but how readily do we see Jesus in the midst of the raging storms of life?

And let us briefly consider Peter. Although he gets credit for jumping out of the boat and attempting to walk on water like Jesus, the crux of the story seems to be his failure; his losing heart, as what he knows, intellectually, about the physical world overtakes his faith to follow Jesus. I don't know about you, but I often resolve to volunteer more time, donate more money, even to pray more frequently ... only to end up pondering what I might have to give up in order to do the things Jesus wants me to do. Like Peter, I get too wrapped up in preserving the *status quo* to contemplate the new possibilities Jesus is calling me to. For fear of sinking, I don't step out of the boat.

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We could, I suppose, hear today's lesson solely as a cautionary tale: how *not* to follow Christ. But it belittles the disciples' legacy and sacrifice to count them as fools; as a hapless band of bumbler who, somehow, come out right in the end. Just as I recount the story of the railroad-wrench-*slash*-boat-form in the antique shop less to belittle myself and more to reinforce what I *learned* from that experience, so, too, does it behoove us to look past the disciples' shortcomings—which all of us share—and focus the lessons of their Christian courage and zeal:

- Notice how the disciples relinquish control; give up their own agendas. No doubt, the twelve would have preferred to remain with Jesus on shore, rather than sailing the Sea of Galilee in an open boat, and in the pitch dark. But when He asked, they went. And later, when they saw Jesus walking upon the water, although they *first* leapt to the wrong conclusion, they soon opened their minds, adjusted their perspectives and grasped Jesus—and His promise—in a new light. Occasionally, being a disciple calls us to give up a great deal ... to up-end our lives. More often, however, it's merely a matter of admitting we were mistaken—that we, too, failed to see Jesus standing with us in the middle of the storm ... of the illness, of the conflict, of the seeming silence of God ... all along.
- Likewise, we see the disciples take risks. Once Peter knew it was Jesus out on the water, he could have asked Him to calm the raging sea or demanded to know what Jesus was doing—and done so from the relative safety of the boat. But Peter somehow discerned that his place was not in the boat, demanding answers; but standing beside Jesus, out on the water. He listened to the Spirit telling him that this moment was not one for prayer or theology, but a time to throw his whole being into following Jesus. The lesson of Peter's attempt ... for us ... lies not in his failure, but in his *response*; in his allowing his faith in Jesus to seize his life and take him somewhere he never would have taken himself. Jesus' definition of our success is not what we accomplish or achieve; it is how faith in Him fires our imagination and powers our endeavor.

- Finally, the disciples show us how to encounter Jesus in the depths of our lives. This stormy, perhaps petrifying episode ends with the disciples worshiping Jesus and proclaiming Him the Son of God, right there in the boat, in the middle of the sea. They don't wait to get to the safety of the shore, much less to a synagogue; they don't mentally add this situation to their prayer list, for later. Their hearts suddenly full and their spirits alight, they praise and adore Christ right where they've caught a glimpse of Him—of what He truly means in and for their lives. In the midst of chaos and confusion, mistakes and missteps, they experience the all-encompassing, all-loving Word-made-flesh, and they spontaneously break forth in praise. They may carp and doubt and deny tomorrow, but they've found Jesus in *this* moment, and they pause to celebrate at once.

Where do we feel storm-tossed? Where do we proceed in fear or dread? Where are we confronted with a challenge that we know we should take, but just can't quite get out of the boat? These ... *these* are the places for us to look for Christ. For the true joy of Christianity lies not in having an answer to all of life's problems or some recipe for unending bliss, but in our drinking in the bottomless joy and savoring the exquisite peace of those momentary glimpses of Christ ... at the times and in the places we least expect to see Him.

