

Sermon for August 9, 2020

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Text: Genesis 37: 1-4 and 12-28 and Matthew 14: 22-33

Sermon Title: *Splashing About*

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Powerful and majestic God, you visit us in dreams, offering us a glimpse of new possibilities. You rescue us from life's storms. Be with us now in this time of worship. Reveal your purpose for our lives and our church. Bless us with the courage to weather the storms we are in now and the courage to follow you. Amen.**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit come. Come as Holy Light and illumine us; come as Holy Wind and cleanse us from within; come as Holy Fire, and burn in us; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.**

Jesus has just had a reality check. His cousin John the Baptist has been beheaded by Herod. Surely, Jesus must have sensed the danger he was in. When the disciples tell him of John's death, Jesus withdraws to a boat by himself to a deserted place. But then the crowds show up and Jesus feels compassion for them, healing their sick and then feeding five thousand men, as well as the women and children gathered on the grassy knolls. He tries to withdraw a second time, going to a mountaintop to pray, sending the disciples into the boat and ahead of him. Then the storm comes up, its waves battering the boat, which by now is far from shore. Even though some of the disciples were experienced fishermen, they must have felt some apprehension.

Fear is real. It sits in your stomach like a giant knot, changes the smell of your sweat, and makes your heart skip and flutter. Sometimes your limbs are so heavy, they feel like dead weight, and it is as if you are paralyzed.

We fear different things, I think, at different times in our lives. There are the storms of youth – the years ahead unknown and uncharted. The fears associated with parenting. I remember my mother insisting that I wear a life jacket even when I was in shallow water. She had lost a teenaged son to drowning, before I was born, so I knew her fear that it could happen again was real. In the fifties, lifejackets weren't the sleek body suits they are now; they were big and puffy and seemed to me to drag you down rather than buoy you up. In the cold waters of Georgian Bay, I was practically blue when I came out of the water.

The fears of the working years: Am I a drudge, a cog in the system, or am I doing meaningful work? There are the fears of old age – will my money last? Will my body be ravaged by disease? What is beyond this life? And, of course, there are the national fears that are kept before us daily: fear of our economy collapsing, fear of the Corona virus, and now TICTOC, which until recently, I had never heard of.

Today's lesson about Jesus walking on the water and Peter's brief walk on the churning sea appears only in Matthew. Mark talks about Jesus coming across the sea and calming it, John has an even shorter version, and Luke leaves it out altogether. It is Peter's appearance in Matthew's Gospel, which makes this version the most often told.

We've just experienced Jesus' power over physical needs. He has healed the sick and fed the multitudes. In today's text, there is the same kind of miracle – Jesus calms the wind and draws Peter out of the water like some startled, frightened fish and returns him safely to the boat. But walking on water is not proof that Jesus is God. That miracle that speaks so powerfully to us today is the miracle of recognition. The disciples in the boat worship Jesus and exclaim: *Truly you are the Son of God.*

We live in a slot of human history, which is no more chaotic than any other time, although that may seem hard to believe. Who would want to live through the Inquisition? Or the Bubonic plague? Or the 100 Years' war? What is different is that, for the most part, we don't recognize the need for a savior. We calm the storms in our lives with devices of our own making. Why do I need a savior? The answers are as individual as each one of us. I need a savior to help me make a life-altering decision; I need a savior to help me through my grief; I need a savior to help me find my true calling in this life; I need a savior to help me see the Kingdom of God in the ordinary details of my life.

It is probably about 3 o'clock in the morning when the shadowy figure appears, walking toward the boat on the churning sea. Someone cries out: ***It's a ghost!*** Immediately, Jesus replies, ***Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*** Peter wants Jesus to prove who he is by allowing Peter to walk on the water toward him.

Have you ever been on water skis, when the boat blasts forward and you come up suddenly out of the shallow water, and begin to zip across the surface of the water, wind blowing on your face and feeling complete freedom? Then you look down at the great blue depth below you, lose your confidence, lean too far forward making the tow rope get slack, and suddenly the whole game is over. You sink down into the cold, blue water, shivering and cold, and wait for the boat to circle around and pick you up. Maybe it was that way with Peter. At first it goes well. He is walking on water. Then he notices the strong wind, perhaps he takes his eyes off Jesus for just a moment, and realizes where he is and what he's doing, and he begins to sink. Jesus responds to Peter's call for help immediately.

The story could have been different. Peter could have skipped across the water with perfect confidence, grabbed hold of Jesus, and called to the other disciples to get out of the boat and follow suit. Perfect faith in the face of the perfect storm. Personally, I'm glad that Peter started to sink. Peter, who stands in for us, reminds me why I need a savior. I don't have perfect faith. Even with every human confidence, I cannot save myself. The miracle for me happens when I cry out, as Peter did, ***Lord, save me!***

How many times does Jesus tell the disciples ***Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!*** How many times, from the opening of Genesis, have we seen God speak a word and bring order out of chaos? How many times have we seen God be the faithful covenant partner, put our needs before God's own?

When Jesus comes into the boat and quiets the storm, it is still dark. But something has changed. This is the first time in the gospel of Matthew that the disciples are said to worship Jesus. Out of any darkness can come a deeper relationship with God. I invite you to think about this darkness metaphorically. Christ is with us in dark times of our lives. But something new is created in the dark. Not the end, but a new beginning.

My mother finally got over her fear of my sinking deep into the waters of Georgian Bay and drowning. I think this might have coincided with my growing out of the lifejacket. I can't be sure, but I can still remember the joy of shedding that cold, clammy jacket and being warmed first by towels, then by a sweatshirt. Not a bad image for shedding fear and being warmed in the light of Christ. Amen.