

**THE DEEP END OF THE POOL; MATTHEW 14:22-33; AUGUST 13, 2017;
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The cover art on your bulletin has a story. The picture of Jesus saving Peter with the disciples huddled in the boat is a 12th century mural intended to be viewed from a distance – located above one of the main porticos to St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Worshippers could see it as they crossed St. Peter’s square to reenter the world.

The artist, Giotto, was commissioned in 1300 by the then presiding pope who was actually in hiding – so difficult had relations with the powerful and abusive nobility become. Peter, you recall, was appointed by Jesus the first head of the church and all the popes since regarded heirs to his apostleship.

Put yourself in the shoes of a 12th century worshipper at St. Peter’s: you know powerful nobles threaten the church; the pope is in hiding. As you pass through the portal and re-enter the world you are reassured by Matthew 14:22-33 depicted in the huge mosaic; Jesus is saving the head of the church from drowning and calming the storm that threatens to capsize the disciples’ boat – the ancient symbol for the church. The mural embodies Jesus’ words, “It is I, do not be afraid.”

Last week I said we claim to be opposed to literalist interpretations of the bible but often discard stories like today’s at face value as unacceptable to our scientific age. Would we discard *Moby Dick* as a tall tale about a mad captain in pursuit of a white whale? Or *Alice in Wonderland* as an irrelevant fairy tale?

Matthew knew his readers could handle a metaphor; it is in that spirit that I invite us to look more deeply into today’s story.

Both 1st and 12th c Christians understood the boat represented the church; the sea stood for the chaos that constantly challenges God’s creation; and St. Peter, the foundation of the church. This story was a compass pointing true north for those early and 12th c believers. What I’m talking about is what Robert Frost meant when he said, “poetry is a stay against confusion.” So is Matthew 14:22-33; so, too, the bible.

It’s no fun being in a small boat on a stormy sea. Years ago, when we had a little 17.5 foot mahogany ski boat in New Hampshire, we always waited until the last day of vacation to have the boat put away for the winter at a marina across the lake.

On this vacation, Ian and Doug and I set out from our quiet bay to cross the big lake at what is called ‘the Broads’ – 5 miles wide and 10 miles long – where no boat less than 21 feet should go if the water is anything but calm.

Of course, on *this day* the sky grew dark and the waters choppy. It seemed the boat covered more distance vertically than horizontally. We slowed down for fear of breaking the sideboards against the swells. I could tell by their questions my sons were anxious, “Daddy will we make it to the other side? What if the boat sinks?” So we started singing camp songs and pulled as close to the shoreline as it was safe to get and still avoid Winnepesaukee’s treacherous glacial rocks. We finally made it and were never so glad to set foot on dry land.

The church in every age seeks to navigate through the choppy, sometimes stormy waters of the wider culture. Individuals too. Maybe you're in the midst of some Nor'easter of life with a diagnosis or career change or relationship on the rocks.

That's what Matthew is addressing today—the visceral and psychological fear like being in a small boat on stormy waters that life presents us with. His readers suffered persecution by the state and religious authorities; plus the deal-breaking tensions within the church that had to do with whether one had to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian. For those raised on the Torah and kosher laws, which was most of Matthew's church, abandoning those tenets would be like abandoning the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

The 12c century church had its own problems – the abuses that led to the Reformation are what Giotto's mural was responding to. It's hard to name a century when the church didn't face grave, overwhelming danger; the wars of the early Protestant era over liturgy and polity that embodied the emerging class struggles of society; slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries that divided church and nation here and in England; in our own time, the role of women, LGBT and transgender persons in the life of the church and wider culture.

The take away is that the church (no less than any other institution) is human and flawed – a leaky boat so to speak. The surprising but humbling fact is that our Lord and Savior entrusted his ministry to this fragile organization.

Today's story about Peter and the disciples reveals our character flaws as a church and as individual believers when we face overwhelming odds. This is the **first time** the disciples are separated from Jesus. Before the feeding of the five thousand Jesus was on his way to a quiet place to pray but the crowds followed him. Today's story takes place *after* the feeding of the crowd and opens with Jesus "*insisting*" that the disciples go across the lake to meet him on the other side; thus protecting his time for prayer.

There it is you see, kicked from the nest to fly on their own; or better thrown into the deep end of the pool to sink or swim; the church in the world without the physical presence of Jesus. This is a post-resurrection story – the promise that he will be with us in spirit and power until we will meet him on the other side – in paradise.

And what happens to the disciples in their tiny boat on their maiden voyage? A storm, of course. The storm of persecution by the state or the high priests; the storm of exploitation by the nobility and their fixation on power; the storm of racial, sexual, gender bias and bigotry. Pick your century.

Matthew connects the dots to his 1st c. readers with the Greek word "basanizo" or "being tortured"; saying the boat/church was *basanizo* by the waves of the sea or power-mongering authorities subjecting Jesus' followers to death.

Plus our personal storms; this story was one of the first that calmed the waters of teenage crisis when my parents' divorce threatened to capsize my little boat. That Jesus comes to rescue us was my 'stay against confusion' at the age of fifteen and on many occasions since.

It is the central metaphor of this story when Jesus walks on water that we all pay attention to and our scientifically sophisticated minds find so difficult to process. One commentator says the modern mind hears this story as defying the law of gravity whereas the biblical mind thinks of it as the *overcoming of chaos* – ‘walking on’ meaning *to make conquest over* the sea which symbolizes the forces of darkness and disorder.

Order in the physical world and then sanity, well being and abundant life is the goal from the very beginning of the bible; first, in creation itself when God’s spirit hovers over the deep, or what the Hebrew calls the ‘tohu-wabohu’, and God said, “let there be light.”

And then in God’s epic experiment with his beloved human creation; the repeated trial and error first to restore order with Adam and Eve and then their children; and after that a new start with Noah and his family and after them the dispersal of the peoples at the Tower of Babel; and all the subsequent failures embodied in our first grab, in Eden, for the deadly fruit of self glorification.

You see the bible never was about defying the laws of nature or reason as a stunt or magic trick but always about bringing purpose and well being to the human family and through them to creation itself.

How misguided our assumption that Matthew is showcasing Jesus’ super-powers. Like the feeding of the five thousand, the focus is as much on the disciples and Peter and how they handle themselves as it is on Jesus.

Peter, like most of us, wants proof of his safety and security. “Lord, if it is you, command me and I will come to you.” The phrase is identical Satan’s invitation to Jesus in the wilderness: “*If you are the son of God command these stones...*”

It doesn’t sound like the voice of Satan nor does it on the other occasions when Jesus rebukes Satan acting through Peter. With one word “Come” Jesus grants permission as he does to the demonic spirits possessing the insane man in Gadarene to “Go” into the herd of swine.

Peter’s mistake is that he leaves the boat – the community – in pursuit of proof and quickly falls into the life-threatening chaos of the sea. How subtly the demonic slithers its way into the community of faith, into the very rock and foundation of the church.

Peter knows that Jesus had been left back on the beach, just as we modern readers know that Jesus has been left back there in history. It seems impossible that he could come to us. So when he appears, walking on the sea, it should be good news, but we of little faith demand a test. The typical interpretation of the story which I can remember from Sunday School – that if Peter had enough faith he could have walked on the water – is quite the opposite of the message Matthew wants us to get.

To say if we had enough faith, we could overcome all of our problems effortlessly and spectacularly sets us up for guilt and failure when life intervenes with its accidents, diseases, aging and challenging circumstances.

Rather, it is not walking on water that faith enables, only God can do that, but *daring to believe in the face of all evidence* that God is with us in the boat; that God is with us here in this community, especially when the storms of life batter our lives and leaky though the boat may be.

When Jesus reaches out to save Peter and offers the gentle rebuke, “O you of little faith; why do you doubt.” The phrase ‘little faith’ in the Greek “distzo” translates as ‘vacillation’ not skepticism. Little faith is that familiar mixture of courage and anxiety, hearing the word of God then looking at the terror of the storm.

The reading today reminds us that the church runs on faith; whatever else the church may offer – softball leagues, concerts, interfaith dialogue – the stock and trade of the church is faith – which is ultimately why people show up.

And faith is a trial and error business. The German WWII martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it was in Peter’s risking his life that he learned both his own weakness and the power of God. Love God and sin boldly St. Paul said. We’ll make mistakes and need to be rescued but we’ll be in good company.

The problem is we’re often content to leave our faith in the theoretical realm – as an intellectual construct rather than a daily practice – until the winds of life begin to rattle us.

The take away today is self-awareness and action; putting our faith, not God, to the test. I heard an interesting definition of courage the other day – ‘courage is doing what is right even when you don’t want to do it.’ The person who shared that with me said, “It sounds a bit too simple for a definition of something as lofty as courage but as I put it to the test in my life, I find that it holds up pretty well.”

You could say the same thing about faith; you could define it as trusting that God is with us as a congregation as we venture into new or risky areas of ministry; or that God is with you and me right now as we face some overwhelming life challenge; trusting that against all evidence.

It’s putting that trust to the test that calms the storms of life; that grants the deep peace in the midst of crisis and turmoil.

There’s little question that we are in uncharted waters with a new president, polarized nation and the tacit approval if not encouragement of white supremacy and nationalism in high places. Yesterday’s events in Charlottesville, VA reveal the rocky shoals of these challenging times.

People long for measured, compassionate, fair responses not lukewarm neutrality or equal time for the sake of equal time that winks its eye at bigotry.

These are days for the church and for you and me to live with courage and faith. To trust and embrace a God who brings order out of chaos, and peace where there is conflict. The horizon is dark; it’s no time to jump ship but to trim our sails and hold firm the tiller. Amen.