

Sermon for 10th Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 14(a)

Readings: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

*God of awe, from whom we flee in holy terror:
your silence burns like ice;
your whisper cuts through fear;
we long to hear your faithful word
of righteousness and peace.
Bless us with bold belief
even in the darkness of the night
and the assault of life's storms,
that we may be messengers of your justice,
in the name of the One whom wind and wave obey. Amen.ⁱ*

It is a joy to be here to celebrate the Holy Eucharist – our first service at St. Andrew’s since March 15, when the wardens determined that the safety of the community of St. Andrew’s required that we suspend services for an anticipated two weeks. After spending significant planning time in developing our Love Thy Neighbor dinners over the years, we learned love required something we could not have imagined.

Since then, I’ve been wrestling with various images of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, both going out on a limb for the sake of love and justice and nurturing the center – which is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the great I am, who is also the image in whom we are created. As St. Paul writes “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.”

In our gospel for last week, we assume that Jesus was grieving after receiving news from the disciples of John the Baptist that their leader had been beheaded in prison. Was Jesus afraid of what would ensue for him with a capricious and cruel leader in this backwater of the Roman Empire? We don't have evidence of his thoughts, simply "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there into a boat to a deserted place by himself." In the parallel story to this one in John's gospel, we read that Jesus realized that the crowd was about to come and take him by force to make him king. In today’s gospel and in last week’s, we find this pattern or rhythm to Jesus' life and ministry -- getting away in solitude to pray and to refresh and center himself in order to return to the world and immerse himself in his work of healing and teaching and forgiving sins. It's what we do best when we are truly the church of Christ -- engaging in times for prayer, learning, and refreshment, and then going out into the world, ideally fully present and responsive to its needs, or inviting the world to come to us to be fed, to be acknowledged, to be treated with respect.

Our gospel for today continues the story from last week. After feeding more than 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, Jesus told his disciples to get back into the boat and go on ahead. He dismissed the crowds and went up the mountain by himself to pray, his second attempt the same day. Then early the next morning, probably sometime between 3 and 6 a.m., Jesus walked on the waves toward the disciples whose boat was being battered on the Sea of Galilee. This appearance is something their minds couldn't fully take in. It's physically impossible. It's dark. They assume they are seeing some sort of ghost.

Jesus greets the terrified disciples as God often greets humans, with an "it is I" or "I am who I am" – the one about whom all description pales. Then Jesus tells them, as God so often tells us, if we are listening, "Take heart" "Do not be afraid." Peter asks Jesus to come to him on the water if this ghost is, in fact, who he says he is. "Come," Jesus says. Jesus' invitation sounds so simple. With Peter, his charge is not to go out on a limb but to do something even more preposterous. With his eyes on Jesus, Peter gets out of the boat and starts doing the physically impossible.

Suzanne Guthrie writes: "Is this hubris? Or, simply an act from a heart longing for union with God? He walks on the water but fear undermines his trust. I think his failure opens to a deepening of a faith more secure than success might have offered. The loving Presence of the One lifts him from his terror. *Peter may not remember how he walked on water, but he will remember how he was saved.*"ⁱⁱ

The invitation to follow Jesus is always at God's invitation, and not our own initiative. Peter – a man often putting his foot in his mouth -- in other words, a man like ourselves, has no obvious merit or gift that lends itself to walking on water, but his faith in Jesus enables him to do something beyond the humanly possible. And there's not even a reason why he needs to do this.

The psalmist writes "Search for the Lord and his strength; continually seek his face." But Peter, like ourselves, allows himself to get distracted by the strong wind, perhaps by his own self-consciousness. He doesn't keep his eyes on Jesus. And he soon finds himself sinking.

Jesus's response to Peter's frantic "Lord, save me" is to reach out his hand and catch him. Only then does Jesus ask this future leader of his church why he doubted. It's too bad the text doesn't convey tone of voice. I like to think it was a light-hearted and loving teasing "You of little faith" rather than a stern or ridiculing confrontation. Peter experiences what Paul shares in his letter to the Romans: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." And through Peter's making himself vulnerable -- we might not think about it, but it's often what wise leaders have the strength to do, to allow themselves to be vulnerable and in touch with the truth of what it is to be human -- and through Jesus' saving actions, the other disciples are enabled to worship Jesus and acknowledge him as the Son of God.

Peter's response to Jesus' loving command to come to him on the water was a risky one by any but divine standards, but through it he and others became new persons in Christ. Like Peter, we suffer from fear and

doubt. God's call on our lives might seem impossible and the demands relentless, If we allow ourselves to be distracted and to think that God's call is based on our own merits or innate strengths rather than our response to God's purpose for us, we can and will fall. But Jesus will extend his hand to pick us up, if we can but look for it in the darkness.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of Peter's response to Jesus's invitation and, I think, to ours:

Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith....The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if [people] imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.¹

Jesus saves us both in the particular time in which we live as well as for eternity. May our faith stay always centered on Jesus Christ, who is God with us, and may we find him even—especially-- in times when we feel that we are falling. Through the Holy Spirit, he will equip us for our call. Let us allow our lives to demonstrate gratitude for who is holding us from drowning and extend that same hand to others as we share the good news of God in Christ with the world that seems often at sea. And may it bring us joy and rejoicing, as well as strength for the journey, freedom from paralyzing fear, and saving grace.

© 7 August 2020 by Jane T. Brady-Close

ⁱ <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=154>

ⁱⁱ <http://edgeofenclosure.org/proper14a.html>

¹ Ibid., p. 441, citing *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1960, pp. 53-60).