

Lost Dreams
Pentecost 10A
PPC
9 August 2020

Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus' little question: "Why did you doubt?" certainly draws our attention. Are you kidding me? Doubt would have been my first reaction. We don't regularly see someone walking on water.

There are many reasons to have doubt. Some are experiential and some are intellectual. In the midst of the chaos that surrounds us in these days, it's not surprising that we would have doubt. COVID 19, an explosion of anger as we react to the murder of George Floyd and the deaths of so many others at the hands of a racist schadenfreude, millions unemployed, starving people across the globe - all of these might cause us to wonder where God is.

Elie Wiesel tells the story, in his autobiography, *Night*, of one of his early nights in Auschwitz. At 15, he had been raised in a very religious Jewish household but doubt had begun to take root in his heart. One night a young boy who had apparently done something to annoy the guards was hanged in the barracks where Elie and his father were. He was hung in such a way that he didn't die immediately but spent hours in agony, twisting and turning. His death was long and torturous and as his cries went on for several hours, finally one of the men cried out to the Wiesels, "where is your God now?" The response came "hanging up there with that boy."

In this story of Jesus walking on water, we are invited into a conversation about the way we envision God and how we live a life of faith.

Immediately preceding this story of the disciples in the boat, the same disciples have witnessed the feeding of the five thousand. After the crowds have left and there is only a hollow

wind blowing on the hillside, Jesus sends the disciples on ahead. They are to get into the boat and cross the Sea of Galilee “to the other side.” Jesus withdraws up the mountain to pray.

The Sea of Galilee is 33 miles in circumference and is the largest fresh water lake in Israel. Not too far from Nazareth it is also a dividing line between Judah and the land of the Gentiles. The Golan Heights are on one side, as is Lebanon and Syria. Jesus sends the disciples, again, into hostile territory. Much of the teaching and preaching that Jesus does occurs around this sea. Nazareth, not far from the sea, was known to be a hotbed for the Zealot movement. It’s interesting to note that Simon the Zealot and Matthew, the tax collector, are both named as apostles as they would have been at opposite ends of the political spectrum of the day.

Many scholars believe that this story was originally a post-resurrection story but that later redactors inserted it into the gospel here. This explains more fully why the disciples were so frightened when they saw the ghost of Jesus walking toward them. We might ask ourselves why later redactors felt the story fit better in this part of the narrative.

This story is also one of the best known in the gospels. Luke’s Gospel is the only one to omit it. The story has become a litmus test for our faith. How strong is your faith? It’s one of those miracle stories that doesn’t translate well literally. Yet, what a rich story of trust and fear. Does it matter whether or not Peter **really** walked on the sea? Could it have actually happened? So many apologists have tried valiantly to make this story factual. Does it have to be? How do we evaluate our faith? When is it okay to have doubts?

One of the first things we need to understand, perhaps, is that to the ancients the sea was symbolic of chaos and danger. This storm that arose that night on the Sea of Galilee even shook the group of experienced fishermen aboard the boat. Jesus comes to them as one who has power over chaos. It is reminiscent of the first chapter of Genesis when God blows over the waters of

chaos, the *toehoo-va-vohoo*, and brings order out of the chaos. Knowing that Matthew was deeply committed to tying together the Hebrew Scriptures with the life of Jesus helps us to understand a little better what is going on here.

How we crave mastery over the unknown!

Wouldn't it be great if we knew that our stories would all have happy endings? That if we followed the rules and behaved well, nothing catastrophic would ever befall us? Our children wouldn't get sick, all marriages would be successful, our spouses wouldn't get Alzheimer's, cancer would not strike among the faithful, the coronavirus wouldn't bring death.

What do you do, though, when you are on the rough waters of a storm that is making you seasick and tossing your well-ordered life into the air? Does it matter that you have regularly attended church and done everything you were told to do that would bring you a life lived happily ever after?

I have such a vivid, detailed memory of searching for answers when it became apparent to me that our family life would not survive as usual. Jim, my ex-husband, had been fired once again. We weren't going to be able to live in our beautiful home and my children wouldn't have the experience of growing up in an upper middle class neighborhood. I was despairing. My dream was exploding, shattered to bits.

A friend convinced me to come to her church because, she told me, the PC(USA) congregation of which I was a member wasn't giving me enough spiritual nourishment. (All the reasons for that are part of another story!) I needed to come with her to worship and attend a Bible study and pray with the women who really knew how to pray.

I went to one Bible study. The scripture we studied that day was about this passage of trusting enough to walk on water. I was told I needed to have a stronger belief that Jim would get

another job and my worries would dissipate. I needed to swallow a bill of goods that this church was selling, pray every week with these women who knew the right way to pray, and voila, my life would all fall into place. It didn't. What I got out of that experience was a sense of my failure as a good enough Christian.

I was sinking on the water and I couldn't see Jesus walking across the water to me.

Here's my problem with the way a group of more conservative Christians interpret Scripture. We read the Bible from the perspective of the Egyptian, not the Hebrew slave. We are citizens of a superpower; we are the conquerors; we live in the Empire. And we read the Bible and want to think that it's talking about us. One of the most remarkable things about the Bible, though, is that the narrative is told from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved, the conquered, the occupied, the defeated. This is what makes it prophetic. History, they say, is written by the winners but in the Bible the opposite is true. This is the subversive genius of the Hebrew prophets. They wrote from a bottoms-up perspective.

Imagine a history of colonial America written by the Cherokees and African slaves. What a different story that would be than the one we teach in our history books! Yet, that is exactly the story the Bible tells. It's the story of Egypt as told by the slaves. The story of Babylon as told by the exiles. The story of Rome as told by the occupied and oppressed. Jesus steps into that story. He asks us to have faith. He sees the storms that surround us and says to us, "Oh, you of little faith."

Maybe it would help to remember that in the reformed parlance, we are not saved by our faith but by the grace by which we receive our faith. "Faith is simply the receptiveness of allowing God to be present in our lives, so as to calm the storms we encounter during our lives. When

Jesus gets into the boat, the storm ends. When Jesus is present with us by the Holy Spirit, chaos loses its power.”¹

My storm doesn't end with my descent into a dark abyss. But be assured, my world of that time did fall apart. I carry the scars of my past with me every day of my life. I struggle with my anger that I didn't get a fairy tale ending. I know what it feels like to be so frightened in the midst of a storm that you don't think you can go on. When I allowed Jesus to take my hand, he did walk me across the water and stilled the chaos within. My heart was opened to look for the stories of those who are not the winners.

Will your faith carry you across even the most roiling of waters on the darkest of nights? Your faith isn't a matter of believing that there is scientific proof of the truth of these miracle stories. What these stories of the gospels tell us is that even something that is meant for harm can, in fact, be used by God to bring healing.

I can hear Peter crying, “Lord, save me!” I can picture what happened next. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

¹ Bob Cornwall at: <http://pastorbobcornwall.blogspot.com/2011/08/whydidyoudoubt>.