

Matthew 14:22-33; Romans 10:5-15
"Doubt & Fear"
August 9, 2020

The world is a scary place. Sometimes it seems like it's falling apart around us. The economy is shaky, millions are unemployed, protests against racism and police violence are ongoing across the country, families are anxious about how, or if, schools will open, poverty, homelessness and inequality continue to increase in our nation and our world. We no longer have faith in government and elected officials. Very little seems to work anymore. Everything seems to be broken by the pandemic. Faith gets harder and harder to come by. Doubt and fear appear to be the order of the day. And there doesn't seem to be a heck of a lot we can do about it.

You're probably wondering, "Why is he reminding us of all that depressing stuff? I come to worship to be uplifted and hear that there is some hope left in the world." Well, the message of today's scripture lessons is that in the midst of the world's brokenness and hopelessness there is hope. And the name of that hope is Jesus Christ.

Sometimes in the midst of all the troubles we face in the world, we feel that God has abandoned us. Sometimes, when we look at the world we feel that God has abandoned the world. That is probably the way the disciples felt as they were struggling to cross the stormy Sea of Galilee in their little fishing boat. Their boat was no match for the wind that was against them. But, in the midst of their distress, Jesus saw their plight and went to them. Amazingly, the scripture says he walked to his friends on the water. When the disciples saw Jesus walking toward them on the water, they thought they must be seeing a ghost. They were frightened.

But it was not a ghost. When he saw and heard their fear, Jesus said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." With those few words Jesus, at least for a moment, quieted their anxiety.

However, the disciples didn't fully believe. Peter spoke for the disciples when he said,

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

He tested Jesus' word. Jesus replied, "Come." "So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus." Peter's faith in Jesus gave him the ability leave the safety of the boat and to walk on the water. But after a few steps Peter started to think about what he was doing. The wind and the waves distracted him. He took his eyes off Jesus. Buffeted by the wind and waves, Peter's faith withered into fear and he sank into the sea.

Peter cried out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him ..." Jesus did not hesitate and say, "You obviously lack faith. You're on your own. Hasta la vista Peter." When Peter called out to him in distress, Jesus immediately reached out his hand and pulled him out of the storm and carried him into the safety of the boat. When Jesus entered the boat with his friends, the wind ceased and all were saved.

This is a story about Jesus and faith. It is a story about Jesus in the sense that it tells us that he is the one who saves from the chaos of this world that threatens to swallow us up. Jesus is the one who will reach out his hand and save us from the turmoil of life that beat us down. "As messiah Jesus is the one charged and empowered by God to shepherd and care for God's people." The story affirms the words of Paul in Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your lips that

Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." And in Romans 10:13 where Paul quotes the prophet Joel, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Jesus will come in the midst of crisis and uncertainty and chaos to give us the assurance of his presence and power in our lives and in the world. Jesus is the one who will lead us to safety.

This is also a story about faith. Faith empowered the disciples in that little boat to struggle against the sea and wind. Faith brought Jesus out to them on the water. And, faith compelled Peter to climb out of the boat and walk on the water toward his Lord. But once he was out of the boat, alone and away from the support of his friends, buffeted by the sea and wind swirling around him, Peter's faith weakened. But his faith led him to call upon Jesus when he began to sink. He knew that Jesus would save him; even in the midst of fear and doubt.

Douglas Hare, in his commentary on the story of Jesus walking on the sea says, "Faith is not a possession but an activity. It is like a song that disappears when we stop singing. Those of little faith are warned that they must exercise their little faith or it will wither away like an unused muscle." You see, Peter and the disciples represent all of us in this story. One important thing to remember as you read the gospels is that when Jesus address the disciples, he is addressing the church. He knows that we are very much like Peter. Just as he said to Peter as he pulled him out of the sea, Jesus says to us each day, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

The story tells us that faith is a gift from God that is of little use if it is not used. It is not a gift that you keep in a safe place in case it should get damaged or broken. Faith is a gift that is meant to be used and even risked. It is a gift that increases and matures the more it is exercised and stretched and challenged.

Faith is a relationship with God who comes to us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Like any relationship faith must be nurtured and cared for.

The Apostle Paul is wrestling with two different kinds of faith in today's lesson from Romans 10. John Wesley called these types of faith, "the faith of a servant of God," and "the faith of a child of God." The faith of a servant is a transactional faith. The servant of God believes faith is all about doing the right things and keeping all the rules in exchange for salvation and acceptance into God's kingdom. The servant of God is a church member, attends worship, serves on committees, gives money to the church, and is a good person.

Peter and the disciples in that boat had the "faith of a servant of God." That's why Peter began to sink when he let the chaos of the waves and wind distract him from keeping his eyes on Jesus who beckoned him to come to him. The faith of a servant is often overcome by the chaos and demands of life. Peter loved Jesus and was deeply committed to him. But his faith was more transactional than a matter of the heart. Peter expected to be at Jesus' right hand when he came into his kingdom. He and the other disciples believed the Messiah would liberate their people from Rome, and they would be the new rulers of Israel alongside Jesus, the King.

The faith of a child of God, on the other hand, is faith motivated by self-giving love and a desire to become like Jesus. The faith of a child of God desires nothing but to be with God. Their life and love are centered on Christ. Paul alludes to this when he quotes Moses, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (Deuteronomy 30:14). The faith of a child of God is a heart filled to overflowing with love; God's love embodied by Jesus Christ. The faith of a child of God is seen in the prodigal son when he kneels before his father saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to called your son" (Luke 15:21). The

faith of a child of God opens hearts to grace and brings self-knowledge: "I am a sinner who needs forgiveness." Grace equips the child of God to accept God's forgiveness and love. Grace opens the heart to receive the Holy Spirit who begins working in the heart repairing a sin-sick soul. Grace leads the child of God to cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work by witnessing to Jesus Christ in the world and following his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The faith of a servant of God asks, "What do I get? What's in this for me?" The faith of a child of God asks, "What can I give? How can I serve?"

We all begin our Christian pilgrimage, like Peter, with the faith of a servant. But, also like Peter, as we walk with Jesus, learn from him his way of love and justice, the faith of a child of God can emerge in us. In baptism Christ calls all of his friends to grow and mature from the faith of a servant of God into the faith of a child of God. Whether we have the faith of a servant of God or the faith of a child of God, we can be assured Christ will be with us through the chaos and uncertainty the world throws at us every day.