

"Little Faith"
Matthew 14:22-33

August 7, 2011

8th Sunday After Pentecost

Many people will give credit to a “strong faith” getting them through various crises – a sickness, loss of a job, or the death of a loved one. When anticipating an upcoming crisis, many people will say – almost wistfully – “I hope my faith will get me through.” These are noble sentiments and people mean well when they say them. But what happens if your faith is weak? Does it frighten you that your faith might not be strong enough to endure the crisis? If Jesus were to look at you, as He did with His disciples in our text, and say, “O you of little faith....,” what would that mean to you?

Our text for today begins shortly after the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus sends His disciples away on the Sea of Galilee in a boat. He dismisses the crowds and then goes up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Late into the night, the boat with the disciples is a long way from land. The waves are beating against the boat (literally “torturing the boat” the Greek says) and the wind is against them. While some might think this was a huge and dangerous storm, there is nothing in the text to indicate that. The disciples, experienced boatmen that they are, are just dealing with the regular difficulty of life on the sea: rough waves and strong winds hindering their progress.

In their difficult state, Jesus comes to them, unexpectedly and miraculously, walking on the water. Will their faith be strong enough to receive Jesus as He comes to them? The disciples, as usual, fail miserably. They are not expecting Jesus (especially in that way) so, when they see Him coming, they were terrified and cried out in fear, “It is a ghost!” This was understandable. The thinking at that time said that the sea was the domain of the devil and his demons. Therefore, it was only natural to misunderstand the identity of the one coming to them on the water.

But Jesus speaks to them, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” In other words, “Be bold! Be of good courage. It is I, your Lord and Savior who overcomes Satan and his work. Stop being afraid!” Jesus’ word is enough – or it should be enough – to settle the issue of His identity.

But it's not. It's not enough for Peter. Peter is often portrayed as some sort of hero of faith in this story for daring to ask Jesus to call him out on the water and for actually walking on the water. This is not true at all. Peter is a fine example of doubt.

First of all, Peter doubts the Word of the Lord. When Jesus identifies Himself, Peter responds in the way which Satan had tempted Jesus in the desert, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to you on the water." Peter refuses to take Jesus' word at face value. Instead, he wants to set up a test of Jesus' Word and gather some proof, not only that He is who He says He is, but that He, as a true human being with weight, can defy physics and walk on water as He apparently is doing.

Second of all, Peter even doubts the work of the Lord. He does not believe that Jesus has the power to do what He is doing: walking on the water. Jesus invites Peter to come out on the water. At first, Peter is able to walk on water as Jesus allows him to do, but he fears and then doubts. Sometimes, we have this impression that Peter gets out of the boat, stands on the water for a moment, turns his attention to the wind and the waves and, out of fear, begins to sink several yards away from Jesus who then has to go over and get him. But the text says that he got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. He didn't become afraid and doubt Jesus from afar. Jesus was standing right next to Peter when Peter doubted Him. Peter was right next to Jesus when Peter began to sink.

How often aren't we exactly like those disciples? When push comes to shove, we are not the champions of faith who we would like to think we are. Like the disciples, we are masters of doubt.

We live our lives in this dark and sinful world. Evil tortures us like the waves tortured that boat. The consequences of sin – suffering, pain, and death – are against us like the wind was against those disciples. We are frightened. We feel guilty about the past: has our life been good enough for God? We worry about the present: will God care for us or abandon us in these uncertain economic times? We fear for the future: what will death or the destruction of this planet bring? Jesus says to us, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Jesus comes to us in His Word and describes how He has overcome the world- the domain of Satan. By Jesus' perfect righteousness, righteousness has been obtained for all sinners. Jesus is the One who obeys the Law of God in our place and you are counted good enough – holy in His sight. By his death on the cross, the perfect and sufficient sacrifice for sin has been made. Jesus is the One who defeats sin and guilt and you have forgiveness for all your sins and a right relationship with your Heavenly Father who will always care for you. By His resurrection from the grave, death has been rendered powerless to frighten you or hold you. Jesus is the one who defeats death and hell and, as a result, life forever in heaven is guaranteed to you after you die.

Yet we doubt that Jesus is who He says He is. We believe it, of course, when life is going smoothly and things are fine. But when the waves of evil are torturing us and the winds of suffering are against us, we are terrified and cry out in fear. Jesus' word and promise are just not enough.

Like Peter, we ask for proof. "Lord, if you are who you say you are, show me a sign of Your love, mercy, forgiveness, and hope. Bid me to come to you." So Jesus gives us the benefits of His work in ways that we can see, touch, and experience. He connects His Word to common water and, in Holy Baptism, washes away our sin, gives the Holy Spirit, and produces faith within us. He gives His Word to men to speak with authority and power to forgive sins in the absolution and promise great things for the future in preaching and teaching. His Word connects Jesus' body and blood to ordinary bread and wine so that through our eating and drinking, we might have forgiveness, life, and salvation through Him.

Initially, we believe these things, mostly when life is going well. But, like Peter, when we are literally standing right next to Jesus – having Himself and His gifts in Word, Water, Bread, and Wine – we turn our attention away from them and begin to look at the guilt within ourselves or the evil outside ourselves in the world and we begin to sink back into doubt. Our strong faith which was supposed to get us through all of that sinks into weak doubt. And we fear all the more.

In our text, Peter does all that he can do. He can't try harder to walk on water. He can't ask Jesus again to allow him to walk on water. All Peter can do is simply say, "Lord, save me." Now, it's up to Jesus. Jesus could let Peter struggle on his own. Jesus could even let Peter drown and die for his lack of faith. But Jesus doesn't do any of that. Jesus reaches out His hand and took hold of Peter. He rebuked him for his little faith, but Jesus saved him nevertheless. For, you see, it was never about Peter and the strength of his faith. Rather, it was about the strength of Jesus and the faithfulness of His promises.

Jesus does the same for us, as well. When we are sinking into the depths of despair, it does no good to try harder to extract ourselves from the mess. It does no good to ask Jesus to help us do better. Like Peter, all we can say is, "Lord, save me." And He does.

Jesus reaches His hand out and takes hold of us again and again. He continues to speak to us in His Word and assure us that He is here and we are safe. He continues to point us to our baptism and remind us who we are: His beloved sons and daughters. He continues to feed us with His body and blood and give us the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

His words, "Take heart" or "Be of good courage" are not simply pious wishes or overly optimistic phrases in a pessimistic world. They are based in reality. But it is not the reality of our strong faith, but the reality of our strong Savior. Peter did not walk on the water because his faith was strong, but because His Lord is strong. What is important for Peter and the disciples, for us, and for all Christians is not the act of faith – how strong it is or how active we are in it – but the object of faith and how strong or active that object is.

For example, think of faith as holding on to something. If you are drowning in the sea and someone throws you a huge rock, you can hold on tight to it, but you are still going to drown. The object of your faith will drag you to the bottom of the sea. However, if someone throws you a life preserver and you are only holding on to it by your fingernails, you will be saved and live. The

important difference is not how hard you hold on, but whether that which you are holding on to can save you.

As we consider the relationship of faith to salvation, our minds are filled with many questions.

One commentator, Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs, put it this way:

If Jesus is the powerful Lord over the sea, will he save us when we call upon him? What if we have failed to believe the promises that he has made to us – will Jesus renounce and abandon us since we didn't believe him the first time? What if I am only a "little faith"? What if I find in myself only doubt when I should have a faith that grows and becomes great, like a mustard seed does? Will he save me, or will he, in all his divine power over creation and his frightening majesty, let me sink and give me over to what I deserve?

This narrative answers these questions. Jesus can save, and he will save all who have even only a little faith in him – even if at times we too doubt. The promise he has made he will keep, even now in the present time, as this tired old age still fights against the new age of salvation. (Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2 – 20:34*, p.764)

Little faith is not the same as no faith. Little faith trusts in Jesus for forgiveness, assurance, and goodness even when the sin, doubt, and evil torture it and the world is against it. Little faith hangs on to Jesus' righteousness, Jesus' sacrifice, and Jesus' resurrection for holiness, forgiveness, and eternal life, even if only by a finger nail. Little faith makes us right before God and grants us salvation, even when we doubt and fear the future. Little faith saves and that's all that ultimately matters. Amen.