

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 13, 2017
The Rev. Jamie Samilio

Jesus Walks on Water

I was having dinner with a Jewish friend the other night and told her this joke: Three ministers decided to do some ecumenical bonding, so a Roman Catholic Priest, AN Episcopal Priest and a Baptist Minister climbed in the Baptist's truck and hauling a large row boat, made their way to the lake. Once about half way out into the lake, the RC Priest stood up and said, "I brought special lures for this trip, I will be right back." He then proceeded to step out of the boat and walk across the water toward the truck. Just then the Episcopal priest also stood up and said, "I forgot the cooler, I will also be right back." He too walked across the water toward the shore. The Baptist looked in utter amazement. Standing up, he yelled out, "I am coming too!" As the Baptist stepped off the boat, he promptly face planted into the lake. The two priests, now gathering things from the truck looked over as they heard the commotion. The RC Priest said to the Episcopalian, "Do you think we should tell him about the rocks just under the surface?" The Episcopal Priest replied, "What rocks?"

Upon hearing this, my Jewish friend said, "You do know that there are rocks just under the surface in parts of the sea of Galilee, right?" I looked at her and replied, "Of course I know that, Jesus put them there."

This passage from Matthew is by far my favorite, as it lets us live into the wonder of God as creator of all. Did Jesus walk on water? Is this just a story for our edification? Was there some scientific explanation? I will not debate the idea of whether Jesus actually walked on water that morning, but I will focus on what message this story holds for us today. Henry David Thoreau once said, "It is not what you look at that matters, it is what you see."

If you believe that Jesus walked on water just as it is written in the Gospel, then I think you are in a fine place on your faith journey. If you believe this passage is just a story, designed to illustrate a point, then I think you are in a fine place on your faith journey. If you believe there is a logical and scientific explanation behind this passage, then I think you are in a fine place on your faith journey. I am not going to argue here today the validity of a literal interpretation of this passage. I am only going to speak about that which I know to be true.

Human beings, under their own power, can walk across a frozen lake.

Ice is cold and shallow compared with the depth of the warmer water that lies beneath it. So too is the way of our spirituality. We can only walk across unfrozen water, when we let our reality go, and focus our spiritual eye on God.

I pray we can put our trust in Christ and put aside our fears and doubts—so we can feel the vastness of our spiritual depth, while focused on Him. By our knowledge and will, we walk only on a shallow frozen surface. By God's knowledge and will, we walk upon a body with a fluid surface and immeasurable depth—Jesus going before us always.

How hard must it have been for Peter to ask Jesus for a towel to dry his hair after this incident? Peter is my favorite. He is genuine and authentic. He gets very emotional and excited about his discipleship, and he often acts on instinct and impulse. In today's

Gospel, when he recognizes Jesus, and not a ghost walking on the water, he takes a leap of faith, without giving it a second thought.

There was a moment when Peter recognized the divine in himself, and believed he could do the impossible. Peter stepped out of the boat and was walking toward Jesus. Strong winds scared him—what knew about this world, was being violated. He, a man, could not walk on water, and he began to doubt himself and his trust in Jesus. Peter went from trust and confidence, to doubt and fear. Fighting against the wind, Peter's broken trust and self-reliance ultimately, sank him.

What is the wind in the Gospel? What is it that steals our resolve and faith from us? What is it that keeps us from fully living the life God has given us and from using the gifts God has given us to glorify God? For me, sometimes it is fear of failure, and sometimes it is fear of success. Sometimes, I think I am just tired, weary from being battered by the "wind" when work has to be done. Most often however, the "wind" that causes me to fear and lose faith, are the voices of conventional wisdom, best practices, and in many cases outright bullying or lies that drowned out the small still voice within. The voice that I know in my heart to be the truth, and where I need to place my trust. The voices of fear are what keep us from accomplishing the missions we have been given. The voice of complacency tells us that someone else will sign the petition, attend the march, feed the hungry, or help the disadvantaged, and welcome the stranger. The voice of mistrust will cause us to turn our backs on the immigrant, look out for ourselves first. The voices of temptation, greed, envy, sloth, and anger are all whispers in the "wind" that fill us with fear. We need to do some spiritual digging if we are to deepen our relationship, and strengthen our trust in God.

I am convinced that it is in our own shallowness that we are most likely to drown.

If we want stronger, deeper relationships with ourselves, God and each other, we need to do the work, the digging. The problem is distraction, and want to the path of least resistance. When I trust Jesus to do what is best for me, and then I do not get exactly what I imagine, expect, or think I deserve, I begin to doubt that God knows best. I lose the trust. The reality is, that I am looking at life with blinders on, and I cannot see God's whole plan for me with my human limitations. Unless I trust, unless I focus, my fears and doubts grow and I lose faith, and slip under the surface. Floundering will not lift us to the surface, only faith will do that. Focusing on Christ and following Him—even if it is across the water—is the way to peace and salvation. The collect today bids us to pray for the spirit to think and do things that are right. To acknowledge that we cannot exist without God, and trust enough to live according to God's will; through Jesus. This is a corporate prayer, and we are called to do spiritual digging, and to deepen our relationship, and strengthen our trust in God as a community of faith—taking brave steps together in all of our missions.

I was trying to put myself in Peter's shoes in this story, while standing on my balcony—I live on the 12th floor. I wondered, if I saw Jesus floating in mid air with His hand outstretched, saying, "Come, walk out here in the air with me, it is such a nice evening." would I go? What if it was the devil tempting me? What if I was having some weird medical issue? Then, for a brief moment, I thought that if it truly was Jesus, I would know it, I am a priest, right? I have enough faith to step off that balcony and take a walk in the clouds—don't I? If I am honest with myself, I do not think I could. Jesus was there in front of Peter—still in the flesh for the first time—and Peter, the Rock, became distracted by the wind, and lost faith. I want to have limitless faith, but I too get frightened by the same "winds" that put doubt in Peter's mind.

"Lord, I believe. Please help my unbelief." These words of Paul tell me that Paul also had to ask Jesus for a towel to dry his hair after slipping under the surface of the spiritual waters on which he walked with God. But fear not, as Paul tells us today, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."

We are human, we all get wet, we all fall in. I need a towel, in fact I need a blow dryer. To be perfectly honest shaving my head would be easiest, since I know that despite my best efforts, I will slip beneath the surface again at some point. It is then that I need to remember that Peter called for Jesus, and Jesus immediately reached out his hand, because Jesus is there for us, if only need to ask. To keep walking on water, to keep moving forward against the winds of doubt and fear, we need to focus on Jesus. Do you suppose that this Gospel may be less about our faith and more about our dependence on God? When we depend on God and trust Jesus to lead us, our lives, our work and our missions go from ordinary to extraordinary.

I need – perhaps we all need to keep repeating..."Be not afraid, I go before you always. Come follow Me, and I will give you rest." Anything is possible with God, and Jesus will reach out and pull us up when we ask.

Still, the mystery remains in this passage, and there are questions that we may never know the answers to. We just need to keep open to the possibilities. In researching for this sermon, I came across something I wanted to share. The Basilisk Lizard, or Jesus lizard, is a creature that can walk on water. The internet has videos of the Basilisk skimming across the surface of the water. They can do this because they move quickly, and do not stay in one place long enough to make an impact that breaks the surface tension. We however, are created to take root, grow, bear fruit, and make an impact. And if God does call us to walk on water, then we need only to focus on Jesus and trust that He will take care of the details. Being a Christian means being brave enough to take a step toward the unknown.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could easily tune our ears to hear, and our eyes to see what we know to be true in our heart? Prayer, worship, meditation, and engagement are all tuning forks to deeper trust and stronger relationships with God.

Tuning us to see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly, day by day—against the wind, or across the water.

"It is not what you look at that matters, it is what you see." Seek to see Christ, to focus on Him, and to follow Him. Where you focus, determines the direction you take. Amen.