

Reaching Out for our Faith

Just before the Gospel reading we shared today, Jesus was having a pretty demanding day. That morning, Jesus heard the tragic news that his cousin John the Baptist had been killed. King Herod had him executed in prison. It was a terrible injustice.

That morning Jesus intended to get away by himself to pray. He needed to know from his Heavenly Father what this meant for him without John preparing the way. But when he got to his retreat location, the whole countryside had found out where he was going. And so, being the Saviour he was, he had compassion for them and spent the whole day praying for them, healing them, delivering them, and then when it was dinner time, he decided to feast with them.

Even though Jesus was at a very low point emotionally, he accessed the abundant provision of his Heavenly Father to bring life and community and comfort into a difficult day. Jesus did the impossible despite the difficult circumstances.

Jesus was experiencing what I call headwinds. Delays, or unexpected changes in plans. For Jesus it was not getting to do, what he wanted to do, and needed to do, when he wanted to do it. Sound familiar?

Headwinds are simply a part of living in a fallen world with sinful people. We don't bring headwinds upon ourselves. It's the stuff that happens to us.

We often hear, "just have faith." "Get more faith." "You need a stronger faith." You've heard those kind of things, right? Maybe you've said or thought them to yourself.

I think that's often how we hear Jesus' question to Peter in today's gospel, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The implication is that if Peter just had more faith, if he'd kept his eyes on Jesus, if he hadn't doubted then he would have walked on water just like Jesus. We've probably all heard or thought those things.

I struggle with this story which probably means I struggle with my faith. Maybe you do too. On the one hand I really want Peter to walk on water. I want to know it can be done. I want that assurance for the times when the boat of my life is being battered by the waves, when I'm far from land, when

the wind is against me, when I'm haunted by my ghosts. I want to walk on water. I want proof that Jesus is real and really present.

Don't you sometimes want that too? My guess is that every one of us here today is facing some situation in which we want a walking on water kind of faith. What is that situation for you today? What would it mean or look like for you to walk on water?

On the other hand there here have been times in my life when I tried to manufacture faith or get more faith as if it were a thing to be amassed and possessed. The problem is that's never worked for me. I've never figured out how to get more faith. Do I pray for ten minutes instead of two minutes?

Maybe I need to be like children who close their eyes and clasp their hands as tightly as they can trying to squeeze out every drop of faith. I wish it were as easy as that. I wish it were as easy as ordering up a supersize faith but I don't think it is. Besides, how much faith do you need to have in order to have enough faith to walk on water?

My faith and my understanding of what faith is aren't what they used to be. They've changed over the years. I think there are events, times, and seasons in each of our lives when everything we thought we knew or believed is called into question. You know what that's like, so do I, so do the people of Ukraine, Sudan, Palestine and a thousand other places across our country and around the world.

Some might worry that the questions, doubts, and changes in faith are a loss of faith. But what if they're really a deepening of faith? What if the real tragedy, the greater loss, is for our faith not to change?

Has your faith changed over the last few years? Is it different today compared to three, five, fifteen, forty years ago? If so, how? And if not, why not?

I grew up with the idea that faith meant accepting and agreeing with ideas or concepts about God even if they didn't make sense or match my experience. Maybe you did too.

Faith was about my belief in God. But what if it's just the opposite? What if faith is more about what God believes about us than what we believe about

God? What if faith is our experience of God desiring us, coming to us, and reaching out to us? Isn't that what Jesus does in today's gospel?

I used to think that faith meant living with absolutes and certainty, having no doubts or questions. Faith meant I was unsinkable. Today that feels more like fear and fundamentalism than faithfulness.

What if faith is the willingness and courage not to get out of the boat, not to run away, not to try to prove something, but to continue showing up even when everything is being shaken to the core? What would that kind of faith look like in your life today? What would it offer you? And what would it ask of you?

I've sometimes associated faith with being good and well behaved, praying harder, believing more and better. But here's the thing. No matter how well behaved Peter was, how hard he prayed, or how much he believed, he was going to sink.

I'm not really surprised Peter started sinking, are you? His sinking wasn't a matter of faith. It was a matter of physics – gravity, density, buoyancy. There's a part of me that wants to ask Peter, "What did you think was going to happen? Why on earth did you think you could walk on water?"

People can't and don't walk on water. Despite what we often do with this story, I don't think having enough faith to walk on water is the point of the story. I think the point of today's gospel is having enough faith to reach out to another who is sinking. That's what Jesus does.

"Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter." A reaching out kind of faith will always support more weight than a walking on water kind of faith.

What if faith is less about our beliefs and more about our actions? What if it's not so much about knowing the truth but about doing the truth?

All through the gospels Jesus demonstrates a reaching out kind of faith. He does it with the blind and deaf, the lame and lepers, the hemorrhaging woman, Lazarus, the woman caught in adultery. Jesus is always reaching out to people who are in over their heads. You and me included. And more often than not he does it through the actions of another.

Haven't there been times when someone reached out to you when you needed a hand? Recall someone who thanked you for reaching out to them at just the right time. That's faithfulness.

Peter wanted a walking on water kind of faith. Many of us do. That kind of faith will always be too small. I think that's why Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" That's not a judgment or criticism of Peter. It's Jesus calling Peter, and us, into a larger faith, a reaching out kind of faith.

What would it be like for you and me to live a reaching out kind of faith today?

Who do you see that is sinking and in over their head? What would it take to reach out your hand and catch another? Who or what situation needs your hand today?

And whose hand do you need? Maybe it feels like you are sinking and struggling to keep your head above water. What if instead of trying to walk on water you took the hand reaching out to you?

You know, when we talk about God, we often talk about how God is all-knowing, he is all-present, and he is all-powerful. Those are the three descriptions that you sometimes hear about God.

And those descriptions of God line up perfectly with the three points of our message this morning. God is all-knowing, which means you are never out of his sight. God is all-present which means you are never out of his reach. God is all-loving and all-powerful, which means you are never out of his care.

Perhaps you are going through a difficult time right now. Perhaps you feel like you have been stuck out in the middle of the lake for a long time. Maybe you feel like God has forgotten you, or he has abandoned you, or he just doesn't care.

That's when you need to remember these three things. You are never out of God's sight, and so that means God has not forgotten you.

You are never out of God's reach, and so that means God has not abandoned you.

You are never out of God's care, because God loves you so much, he sent his Son to die for you.

He is the all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful, all-loving God who knows your troubles and will rescue you in his perfect timing.

So, don't lose focus! Keep your eyes on Jesus, not on your problems. Trust him. Believe him. Step boldly out into a life of faith and adventure. And when the going gets tough, remember. You are never out of God's sight. You are never out of God's reach. You are never out of God's care.

Offer a hand. Take a hand. Just make sure that you reach out in faith. Amen