

Sink or Swim, Hope v. Despair

Matthew 14:22-36

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Right then, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came and he was alone. ²⁴ Meanwhile, the boat, fighting a strong headwind, was being battered by the waves and was already far away from land. ²⁵ Very early in the morning he came to his disciples, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified and said, "It's a ghost!" They were so frightened they screamed. ²⁷ Just then Jesus spoke to them, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." ²⁸ Peter replied, "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ And Jesus said, "Come." Then Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when Peter saw the strong wind, he became frightened. As he began to sink, he shouted, "Lord, rescue me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him, saying, "You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind settled down. ³³ Then those in the boat worshiped Jesus and said, "You must be God's Son!" ³⁴ When they had crossed the lake, they landed at Gennesaret. ³⁵ When the people who lived in that place recognized him, they sent word throughout that whole region, and they brought to him everyone who was sick. ³⁶ Then they begged him that they might just touch the edge of his clothes. Everyone who touched him was cured.

This morning we have a nature miracle. There are many jokes about nature miracles. One of them is the tale of three clergy members going out fishing. The Episcopal priest, when they're out on the water, says, I've forgotten my lunch and he jumps out of the boat and runs across the water to the shore, gets his lunch and runs back. A little while goes by and the Catholic priest says, I've left my tackle box in the trunk, and he jumps out of the boat, walks across the water to the shore, gets his tackle box and walks back across the water to the boat. The Baptist minister has taken all of this in. He's new to town and is amazed. He hasn't forgotten anything in the car, but not willing to be outdone, he says that he's forgotten his lucky hat, he jumps out of the boat and promptly sinks to the bottom. The Catholic turns to the Episcopalian and says "I guess he didn't know where the rocks are."

Whatever today's Gospel from Matthew is about this is not what it is about. There are no rocks submerged just below the surface. Nevertheless, if we explore the miracle too closely it won't stand up to much scrutiny. We read at the end of today's pericope that everyone acknowledged that Jesus was the Son of

God. It was a brief and insubstantial revelation. They abandoned him at the Crucifixion. Those healed, the disciples, Apostle and followers all renounced him. The walking on water had no effect. Instead this story is about Peter's Faith and Doubts more than it's about Jesus's ability to walk on water. We are to pay attention to Peter's reaction and not to the walking on water.

As you may be aware Peter didn't get his name for being the most intellectual disciple Jesus ever chose. His name in Aramaic, Kēpha¹ כִּפְא and in Greek πέτρος, petros, means rock. Matthew elsewhere says that Peter got this name because he was *the rock upon whom Jesus founded the church.*² That may be true but I remain convinced that Jesus called Simon by the nickname *Peter* because Jesus was convinced that that was what he had between his ears. I know in my own experience with the Lord that most of the time I simply have rocks between my ears, but fortunately the Lord doesn't give up on me for my lack of intellect and understanding of him.

We have this morning a story about a failure to trust and understand. We trust and understand something because we have hope. I read in a Christian Century³ article that the opposite of hope is despair. Despair is the greatest enemy of faith. Peter doesn't trust when he's walking on water and he sinks. He gives into Despair. What might the water be that we're called to walk on? How can we express faithfulness? Peter lost faith, gave into despair, and almost drowned.

I am very honored to be with you this morning in New York City at St. Mary the Virgin. Last Sunday was my first time back with you since early March. I have missed being present. I have always found this church to be a liminal place. That is it is a place where the separation of heaven from earth is thin. I began attending in 2002 when my spiritual life was bleak. I'd completed a Supportive Housing project in Westport, bringing permanent housing to the formerly homeless mentally ill in one of the wealthiest communities in the U.S. The zoning battles, the funding battles including a capital campaign, the battles with neighbors over eight years that it took to complete this housing exhausted me and I knew that I would have to battle more and build more supportive housing because the need was great but I didn't have the spiritual resources to do that.

Barbara was in Sao Paulo with her Mother for a month. I spent three Sundays listening to Jim Forbes at Riverside. He was inspiring but the liturgy was less so. I'd never been to St. Mary the Virgin and everything I'd heard about you indicated that worship here was more of a spectacle than a serious undertaking. Rumor was that a stylist made sure we all looked good before processing. Fr. Gerth preached that Sunday. He said in his sermon that the practice of clergy kissing the altar was all that remained of the kiss of peace when passing the peace was taken away from the congregation. I knew immediately that liturgy was a profound experience here. Worshiping with you restored me.

¹ Aramaic for Rock

² Matthew 16:18

³ Charles R. Pinches, "How to Live in Hope," **The Christian Century** 134/15 (July 19, 2017) pp 22-25.

We went on to build more supportive housing in Westport. That is, permanent housing for the formerly homeless mentally ill.

In February and March this church and all churches faced many challenges in what we thought was a tough environment for any institution. We may look back on those days with nostalgic longing.

The ongoing life of this congregation and of many congregations is in doubt. What was barely enough now seems like luxury. How do we not sink in the storm as Peter did? How do we maintain hope and not give in to despair?

I am fascinated with studies on congregational growth and health. The situation closest to where churches are today are those that study what happens when a church building burns down. Studies show that congregations that rebuild to look exactly like they looked before the fire, fail. Congregations that take the fire as an opportunity to do something new, thrive. Since I am emotionally biased towards doing something new it is perhaps not surprising that I cite these studies. In addition I have seen a church rebuild after a devastating fire to be exactly what it was, and fail. What does failure mean for a church? I think it means that the congregation either goes out of existence or begins to exist only to exist and loses all sense of mission.

We are, without seeking it, in this opportunity and if we as a congregation are to thrive in whatever happens next we will most likely do so if we reimagine how we do church in this new world. Time spent despairing what was lost will smother the hope for what may be. Like Peter we will sink.

For those who have heard me teach you will remember that as Walter Brueggemann pointed out the movement in the lament psalms is from:

Stability→Chaos→New Possibility.

The only thing that will never happen is we will never go back to where we were. The New Possibility might be much better than what was. It might not be. It will certainly be different and God will be in the difference.

Peter was initially afraid when he saw Jesus walking on the water. He became afraid again when the winds picked up. Peter is always a bad example on how to respond to Christ. We have stepped out of a very leaky boat. The challenge for us is to be open to new possibilities as we are called to serve in this place in a very changed City and unsettled times. We have the opportunity to continue to be a liminal place for those who worship here, a thin place where the borders between heaven and earth are porous, but in a transformed way. May we, unlike my patron Saint, have faith.

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