

"Lord, save me!"

August 10, 2008 | Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 14)

Lectionary citations

Gen 37:1-4, 12-28 with Ps 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45b

Rom 10:5-15

Matt 14:22-33

Job 9:8 "He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea."

Years ago, I used to take my vacations in Michigan, just south of the Straits of Mackinaw. We had a small cabin on Burt Lake, part of the inland waterway between Lake Michigan and Lake Superior. We had a limited budget and with our busy work schedules, we could not spend much time at the lake. However, I really wanted to take advantage of staying on the lake by getting some kind of boat. One summer, I rented a lake or flat-water kayak. Lake kayaks are much longer than white water kayaks and even have some room for camping gear. My spouse was not interested in this hobby, so after careful preparation, I started exploring the lake on my own. After a long day's paddling, I was on my way back to the cabin, traveling northward in the middle of the lake. As I paddled along, I started noticing a wind from the west, and some small waves hitting my kayak broadside. When I turned west to head into the beach, I realized that I was facing a stiff headwind and that the waves were increasing in size. I did have the comfort that they were no longer hitting me from the side. However, I realized that I was not getting any closer to the beach, and that the waves were starting to break over the bow of my little boat. I was getting nervous. It was getting late, and the wind kept getting stronger. I decided that I would not be able to reach the beach heading into the wind. If I was going to get to shore, I needed to turn around and head towards the east shoreline. However, the prospect of turning the side of my boat to the wind and waves was terrifying. It might flip the boat, and I was pretty sure that my Eskimo roll was not strong enough to bring me back upright under these conditions. However, there was no way that I could just

keep paddling into the wind. I rehearsed the turning technique in my mind and taking a deep breath, I made the turn. It worked. The wind started pushing me east, and I was almost surfing on the waves that were now breaking over my rear deck. In a few minutes, I grounded on the eastern shore of the lake. Climbing out of the boat, I went looking for a kind soul with a telephone. I was soon safe and sound back at the cabin.

Based on this experience, I can sympathize with the disciples in today's Gospel who were stuck out in the middle of the lake, their boat "buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it." The disciples were doing what Jesus had told them to do, to go on ahead of him to the other side, leaving Jesus alone to pray. They are not making any headway, but they are still trying to go where they Jesus' orders. Maybe, like me in my kayak, they were afraid of making the turn to go back to Jesus. Turning the boat broadside to the wind and waves would be too risky. If they try to turn, the boat will flip, and they will all drown. Therefore, they are stuck out there on the lake, and it is the "fourth watch of the night" between 3 AM and 6 AM. They are in some serious trouble.

Even though they were fishermen, their boat was small and fragile, and they viewed the lake with mistrust. The lake was a place of danger and chaos; it was unpredictable, and the home of evil spirits. Therefore, it is not surprising, that when Jesus walks to them across the water, they think it is a ghost and cry out in fear. I am sure they were thinking that the end had come. Jesus comforts them, and when he gets into the boat, the wind dies down, and the disciples praise Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus gives the disciples another glimpse of his closeness to God the Father, in this case by showing that he shares in God's mastery over nature. This is the way the story is told in Mark 6 and John 6.

Matthew adds something more, the story of Peter getting out of the boat. In Matthew's version, Jesus is not only giving the disciples a little demonstration of Jesus' identity. Jesus is also working one-on-one with Peter, preparing Peter for what he would become, the leader of the Church. The dialogue starts with Jesus' "I am" statement, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." While we can assume the

rest of the disciples continued to crouch in the bottom of the boat, Peter makes an amazing response, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." Peter has been criticized for putting Jesus to the test, but to me this seems more like a declaration of faith. Peter is saying that he believes that if Jesus calls him, he can do something impossible, walking on water. Jesus gives a simple answer, "Come." Peter gets down out of the boat. Now Peter is walking on the water towards Jesus. However, he "sees the wind," becomes afraid, and starts to sink. Nevertheless, it is in sinking that Peter really demonstrates his faith in Jesus. He does not call out to the other disciples for a life preserver. He does not try to swim to the boat or to shore. Instead, he calls out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" Jesus saves him.

As they are now standing together on the water, Jesus asks Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" No reply from Peter is recorded. It is left for us to imagine the tone with which Jesus addresses Peter. I believe it was a very gentle reproach, free of anger. Jesus uses this term, "little faith," five times with the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is telling his disciples to trust God to provide for them...rather than to fear storms, hunger, and poverty. If they trusted God a little more, if they had faith as small as a mustard seed, they could move mountains. Jesus and Peter climb into the boat together, and the water is calmed.

Peter was not the rock of the Church because he was perfect. He failed repeatedly, but I think Peter's greatness was that he kept asking Jesus to call him. When Jesus called him, Peter listened and responded. Peter did not always understand what Jesus was asking him to do, but he kept trying until he got it right. I believe that every Christian is called to ministry and mission work. That is easy to say. What is harder to understand is how this call plays out in each of our lives. Perhaps Peter can provide a pattern for the rest of us.

- First, we need to ask Jesus to call us to do something beyond our capabilities. Do not sit around waiting to be called, start praying for a call.

- Second, we need to listen patiently for Jesus to respond. The response may not come in a time of peace; in fact, it is more likely to come at a crisis point in our individual and congregational lives. We may misunderstand the call when it comes. However, that is not a reason to ignore it.
- Third, we need to act on our call. A call is a call to action. We may think we can only act when we are perfectly prepared. Wrong! Do not wait. Get up and do something! We may not get it right the first time, but that is no reason not starting the work!
- Fourth, we need to keep our focus on Jesus, rather than becoming distracted by the problems and obstacles we face. The only way we can do something beyond our normal capabilities is to rely on God. If we lose sight of Jesus, we have only our own strengths to rely on and we may suddenly find ourselves alone with our problems. It does not matter how much money, people, or resources we have. If our project is not Jesus-centered, it will not fulfill God's purpose for us.
- Fifth, when we get in trouble, our first action, not our last resort, is to call on Jesus for help. Jesus will save us. That does not mean every project we start will succeed. Jesus will save us from despair, so we can pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and try again.
- Sixth, when we fail in a ministry or mission, it does not mean that the call is over. A call lasts a lifetime. Jesus wants us to learn from our failures, strengthen our faith, and get back to work. A mission is not a business venture or a social service program. Even if the impact on the world is negligible, the impact on developing our faith and our relationship with Christ can be tremendous.

In the Gospels, Peter does not have a realistic view of his own capabilities. However, he knows who Jesus is. In Matthew 16, just a few pages after today's events, this dialogue is recorded:

"But what about you?" Jesus asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven;

whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Peter had his part to play in building the Church. We also have a part to play. I know that God has called this congregation to its own unique role in the Body of Christ. Let us start praying for Jesus to call us and start listening for that call. He is probably already calling us to the next stage of our faith journey. When we hear the call, let us keep our eyes on Jesus, let us take a deep breath, and let us step out of the boat. Amen.

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