

10th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.13.17
Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

You have heard it said that, if you but have faith, you can walk on water. But I say unto you, that's not what this story is about. You have heard it said that, if your faith overcomes your fear, you'll never falter like Peter did. But I say unto you, if we're going to shame Peter yet again, let's at least do it for the right reason. The fact is I think this is a much subtler story than the wondrous walking on water might have us believe and than most preaching on it would have us know, and its subtlety starts with the story that just precedes it, conveniently the story we heard last week.

Maybe you remember it. Jesus, having just learned of the murder of John the Baptist, went off to a deserted place by himself. He had, of course, been close with John, his cousin; what's more, he had followed in John's way through life, John being the herald of this, the Messiah. This is to say that Herod's having had John beheaded (and as entertainment for his birthday party no less) might well have affected Jesus both personally and vocationally, something he'd deeply grieve for the personal loss it amounted to, but something he would also find daunting, given that everything that happened to John in life seemed later also to happen to Jesus.

Jesus, like John before him, would (it seems apparent now) die at the hands of imperial authority, recklessly and fecklessly expressed. Sure, Jesus' death wouldn't be as trivialized as John's was, but it would be public and spectacular. And who's to say which is worse?

I think this is why Jesus went off alone: to come to terms with the loss of John, to come to terms also with the grief and dread that likely attended it. And I think this is why the crowd followed him: to see how Jesus would respond to this. I said as much last week, that I think some in the crowd came in compassion for Jesus, while others came curious as to whether Jesus would do something about this offense, this provocation. And if he were to do something about, what might he do?

Things can escalate so quickly, as we know this morning quite acutely. And if there were a revolution, it certainly wouldn't be televised. You had to go and see it in person.

I also said that the growing crowd, which would soon grow hungry, might have been a temptation to Jesus. After all, he could have whipped them up to be a force for revenge, I suggested. He could have made soldiers of them, I implied, devoted as they were to Jesus, and now anxious at the falling darkness and at their own growing hunger for their having no food themselves. He could have made regiments of the crowd, and he could have done so merely by feeding them, which warlords the world over have done and still do. Boy soldiers can be made and won with a crust of bread. What's more, he might even have *wanted* to make regiments of this crowd—soldiers all put to the task of working out Jesus' grievance against Herod.

I mean, Herod had it coming to him, wouldn't you say?

This is something Mark's gospel suggests—that Jesus might have been preparing for war. In Mark's telling, Jesus sat the whole crowd down in groups of fifty and a hundred, which is exactly how a military leader would organize men for war. The fact, then, that Jesus *didn't* give them marching orders makes him all the more wondrous, mysterious, all the more worthy of worship.

Matthew is subtler on this suggestion. But I think it's there—that Jesus could have conscripted them, both in body and in their thinking, and he might even have been tempted to do so.

But he didn't, I said; he neither manipulated the crowd to be used for his purpose nor did he even feed the crowd, which would have the first step in manipulation. Instead, he told the disciples, "You give them something to eat." Really, instead he formed the church.

And that matters to me. It matters that the one whose leadership I'm to regard as authoritative isn't in this for his own power and glory, isn't looking for devotion or loyalty in service of his own ego or in generating a cult of personality. It matters that the one I look to for guidance isn't going to then disregard me as a person altogether, to set me only to his agenda for his purpose. It matters that instead this one should have the grace to set aside his own grievance and to take on a project larger than the one merely on his mind at any given moment, a task grander than the one that would see to his own dominance.

Six years ago I preached on this story having seen something in it I'd never seen before—and it didn't sit well with me, this new implication of the story. The thing I noticed for the first time was this detail, which doesn't seem like much: "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds."

Not much. No surprise here. He'd wanted to be alone, after all. Upon hearing of John the Baptist, he had withdrawn from where he was; he'd withdrawn from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But then a crowd gathered, and at some point his disciples apparently also found him, so his withdrawal came to nothing. Surrounded once again, he healed those in the crowd who needed healing, and then he fed all in the crowd, which numbered well over five thousand, and now he'd try to be alone again. So he sent the disciples on ahead and dismissed the crowds once the disciples were gone.

The language, though: it's more fraught than just that Jesus made arrangements for everyone to leave him alone. It's more problematic.

Consider, Jesus would tell the disciples something similar to this at another time later on, similar but also very different. It was on the night of his arrest, just after he "instituted the Lord's Supper." Then he explained to those still at table with him, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."

"I will go ahead of you."

And so it would be, which we learn on the morning of the resurrection, when an angel of Lord said as much to the women who'd gathered at the tomb. They'd come with no stated purpose, according to Mathew; they'd just come. So there they were for an angel of the Lord to tell them that the they should "...go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'"

"He has gone ahead of you."

Come to think of it, there was one other time, one other time when the ordering of people is so clearly stated and therefore is likely important. This was when Jesus had for the first time begun to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and must undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. It was the first of three times that Jesus would speak of his passion to the disciples. And at this, Matthew remembers Peter taking Jesus aside and rebuking him, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But this had Jesus rebuking Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

And this sounds harsh, right? This sounds like Jesus getting angry at Peter for Peter showing concern for him. But what Peter was actually doing—or what he was *also* doing—was attempting to sway Jesus from his path. You might even say he was *tempting* Jesus away from his path. “This must never happen to you,” he said.

But, no! See, it was *imperative* that Jesus allow himself to undergo great suffering because the other option was to do what countless leaders of countless power and principalities and nations and empires had done for time immemorial and would do for time immemorial—that is, do anything to save his own skin and to defend his own turf. And this is something God’s Christ simply could not do, so to insist that he should is to get out of line.

Therefore, “Get behind me, Satan. Get behind me, adversary, for you are thinking in terms of survival at any and all cost, while Christ was to think on salvation for all though at cost to himself and himself alone.” It was backwards; this understanding of leadership was getting it all backwards and inside out. And that was very much the point—the point of his life, and the point of his leadership. He would go on ahead of us. He *does* go on ahead of us into God-knows-what risky circumstance, into God-forsakenness and absurd defiance of even death. He goes ahead of us.

Except for this one time, except for now when he sent his disciples on ahead of him.

It wouldn’t go well for them—the disciples. They’d suffer a bit under this disorder. “When evening came, and Jesus was there alone, by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.”

You know, we’re not supposed to think about Jesus failing his friends. This failure of Jesus to take his proper place ahead of the disciples, this failure of Jesus to take the *lead* in the way of self-giving love: we’re not supposed to think about Jesus, when staring down the most intimidating truths that life and existence throw our way, turning then to his friends and saying in essence, “You first.”

So what if, just this once, he did?

The night in Gethsemane before his crucifixion, the night when he prayed, “Take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done,” this is supposed to be the night (the *only* night!) when Jesus contended with second thoughts. To be the Christ or not to be the Christ: that was the question that one night alone. Yet even then, his second thoughts didn’t cost his

friends a thing. Sleeping the night away nearby, they were never at risk as Jesus begged to be spared.

Not so here, though. Not so on this stormy sea. When Jesus sent his friends ahead, something real was at stake for them, especially as evening fell and the boat was battered by waves and far from land, especially as Jesus stayed on the mountain by himself until morning, apparently able to see the boat at sea but unmoved to help.

We're not supposed to conceive of Jesus behaving in this way—except insofar as this gospel testimony might have us do.

I wasn't happy at the discovery of this suggestion in the text six years ago. I remember that very clearly. And as for three years ago, when this story came up again (as it does every three years in the three-year lectionary cycle) I didn't preach on it at all. This year, though...

During the 2008 election season, television journalist Charlie Gibson conducted an interview with Sarah Palin. It would regard her agreeing to be John McCain's running mate, a candidate now for vice-president in spite of having very little political experience. He asked, "When McCain asked you to take the number two spot on the ticket, for a moment, did you think no?"

"I did not," she said. "I thought yes right off the bat..."

Gibson pushed her on this point: "And you didn't say to yourself, 'Am I experienced enough? Am I ready? Do I know enough about international affairs? Do I—will I feel comfortable enough on the national stage to do this?'"

She said, "I didn't hesitate, no."

Again, he pushed: "Doesn't that take some hubris?"

She replied, "I—I answered him yes because I have the confidence in that readiness and knowing that you can't blink, you have to be wired in a way of being so committed to the mission, the mission that we're on, reform of this country and victory in the war, you can't blink. So I didn't blink then even when asked to run as his running mate."

I realize now I admire a would-be leader who has the wisdom to blink. In this new context of six years later, in this new context of this very morning, I realize I trust a would-be leader who has the humility to pause and even falter because of the recognition that the task before him (or her) is daunting indeed. Really, I see now that I can most confidently get

behind a would-be leader who is imaginative enough and understanding enough to discern what's actually at stake and what it will actually take to accomplish the goal.

To save the world; to free humanity from our own violence and thrall to death; to liberate all the creation from human dominance that we might instead exercise a more gracious dominion and likewise to free all creatures from the might-makes-right of life within the limitations of time, space, and matter; to release us from our bondage to greed and envy, grievance and resentment, competing rights instead of flourishing personhood and people; to deliver us from ever-escalating aggression, diffusing explosive speech and circumstance before detonation: I can give Jesus a moment, or even a whole night, to second guess himself, to probe and test himself, and to consider the worthiness of the mission given the cost.

In fact, it's this nightlong second-guessing, this nightlong preparation, that makes it so I can get behind him at all.

Apparently, that's what it would take: one night. Apparently, this is what Jesus needed to confirm himself as the Christ. This is what's meant in his walking across the water, with hardly any regard for the fact that such a thing is impossible. Moreover, this is what's meant in his declaring himself not the ghost the disciples stuck in the storm supposed him to be, declaring instead, "Take heart, it is I," or better to be translated, "Take heart; I am."

You've heard it before—this "I Am." In fact, whenever we spend any time at all with the Gospel of John, we've heard it over and over again. *Ego eimi* is how it reads in Greek, and almost everywhere else this is translated as "I am." Like here: "I am the resurrection and the life." Or here: "I am the good shepherd." Or here: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Or here, much earlier in time, way back in pre-history, when there was but story and when the Lord named Himself at Moses' request.

Having called to Moses through the mysterious sight of a bush burning but not consumed (the very picture of God as sustaining spirit whose being defies death) the Lord ordered Moses to go to the people enslaved in Egypt.

Daunted, though, Moses asked, "Who shall I say sent me?" He needed to know on what authority he'd approach the people and moreover the Pharaoh. "What is your name?" he asked impertinently.

The bush said, "Tell them, 'I Am' has sent me."

I Am — this being, this death-less self-sustaining being whose being lends being to all that is and would be, this being by which all that is has its being, this being by which there is anything at all and by which life endures and persists and insists, overcoming the ever-looming but never-victorious threat of non-being. “Take heart: I Am.” By this, Jesus confirmed that he once again one with God. To a boatful of fearing disciples that the journey with Jesus had suddenly become unsteady, Jesus confirmed that he was back and ready to take the lead on this journey from life to Life.

Peter wasn't convinced, though, so, echoing once again the one who tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Peter said, “Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Can you hear it, the echo, the reference? “*If* you are the Son of God,” the tempter said, “then command these stones to be turned to bread. *If* you are the Son of God,” the tempter said, “then throw yourself down from this great height.” “Lord, *if* it is you...” Peter said, “command me to come to you on the water.”

And I don't know why Jesus acted on Peter's command, not when he'd so steadfastly denied acting on so similar a command in the past. I don't know if it was a matter of giving a friend the benefit of the doubt, or if it was a matter of compassion for one struggling to overcome fear. Maybe Jesus pitied Peter. Maybe it was clear to Jesus that Peter had hardly the power the tempter had had in the wilderness, so Jesus didn't need to exercise such resistance to the suggestion of doubt: “*If*...” Really, Peter was hardly in the position to withstand once again being likened to Satan. So Jesus told him, “Come,” and lent him some aid, which resulted in his recognizing Jesus: “Truly, you are the Son of God.”

This weekend has presented fresh evidence to my mind that we need a leader whose wisdom goes deep, whose courage withstands, whose way is clear and clarity, and whose grace abounds. We need this from the person who goes before us not so we need not go that way ourselves but so we know *how* to go — how to proceed in the making of peace, how to conduct ourselves that the end we seek is expressed in the means of our seeking, how to respond to evil that it might not find foothold, how to live *now* amidst God's kingdom of flourishing love that in its promised coming it might be here.

So, as Christ took some time to test himself and prepare himself, we can take some time as well. Sit and consider the world to which we awoke this morning. Sit and consider the call set before you today. Watch and listen for Christ who's gone before us to make clear our

aim, which is the whole of creation made new by beloved community, and to show us the way, which is healing the sick and feeding the hungry and doing works of compassion. Sit and consider, take heart and join hands. There is much for us to do.

Thanks be to God.