

Pentecost 10A + August 13, 2017
Matthew 14:22-33
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
Nancy Raabe, Pastor

Have you ever been in a time of personal crisis that seemed to demand that you take some kind of action, but you didn't know what? And how did you deal with that?

For me, one of those times occurred when I was between jobs 23 years ago. Well, I didn't know I was between jobs—all I knew then was that I had lost what I'd thought was going to be a long-term position as music critic of the Milwaukee Sentinel.

I'd arrived from Boston eight years before to take the job at the Sentinel. Since then things had been going well. I loved what I did, and my work seemed to be respected and appreciated. I was tough, but because of that it felt as if I was making a difference in the life of the arts in Milwaukee. Then came distant rumors of a merger with the Milwaukee Journal. The freight train of the merger got closer and closer in the months that followed. Arrogantly, I thought I'd survive the crash. But I didn't. Word came down that all positions at the Sentinel that were duplicated at the larger Journal went to Journal employees. I was out, along with many of my colleagues.

I didn't know what I was going to do. There weren't any comparable writing jobs in the arts. In desperation, I started applying for random positions, anything I could find that involved writing, editing, or word processing (as we used to call it), because I didn't believe I was equipped to do anything else.

In the year that followed I was turned down for every job I applied for because I was either overqualified, underqualified, or simply just not qualified. I took things into my own hands, and was humiliated. Bill was still teaching at UWM so we were able to pay our bills for the time being, but I felt strongly that I should be working, too. It was a dark and stormy period, and I couldn't see the way out.

In our gospel reading today the disciples, too, were out of ideas. There they were in their little boat in the midst of a dangerous storm way out on the Sea of Galilee. It had been a stressful time even before this. They'd been coping with the horrendous news of the beheading of John the Baptist. It's impossible to imagine the distress this must have caused Jesus and his disciples. This is why Jesus desperately needed time alone to grieve and pray. Shortly after hearing of John's death, he managed to sneak away to a deserted place on a boat, but the crowds followed him and wouldn't leave him alone. In compassion for them, he and the disciples performed the miracle of loaves and fishes. Jesus then sent his disciples across the sea in their little boat, and went up the mountain to still desperately seeking that time to be with his Father.

[SLIDE: "Disciples See Christ Walking on Water," Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1907; see last page]

But things were not going well for the disciples on what should have been a routine trip across the big lake. All night long they'd had been suffering through a terrible storm that kept battering the little boat. They were exhausted, cold, and wet, but mostly they were afraid for their lives. When an apparition began to come toward them during the fourth watch of the night, between 3 and 6 a.m., they were that much more terrified. "It is a ghost!" they cried out in panic.

But of course, it was not a ghost. It was Jesus himself coming toward them, as he lovingly announced: "Take heart, it is I!" Leave it to Peter, though, to demand proof: "If it IS really you, Lord, then make it possible for me to walk toward you on the water, just as you are walking toward us!"

In his doubting, in his demanding, Peter stands for those who are stubborn and slow to believe. That Peter is the central figure in this story is reflected in luminous painting of this scene by the great early 20th century American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner. Our gaze is drawn toward Peter, standing near the front of the boat as he is about to go out on the water. Jesus is purposely

much hard to identify, appearing in the upper left-hand corner as an abstract oval of light. Our focus is on Peter and what he is about to do.

It is human nature to be like Peter, to demand proof, to demand signs of God's faithfulness. But even when we glimpse Jesus for a moment, often we are easily distracted. Like Peter, we falter, and begin to tumble into the abyss all over again.

In response to Peter's demand, Jesus bids him come toward him on the water. Peter starts out but suddenly remembers the wind and the waves, and starts to sink. The spontaneous cry then comes from the deepest part of his being, just as it does from ours when we are in distress: "Lord, save me!"

"Oh, you of little faith," Jesus might have said to me in the midst of my job crisis 23 years ago, if I had known enough to listen. Back then, I didn't. Only much later was I able to recognize that I *had* cried out like that, in my own way, and that Jesus *did* rescue me. It's amazing how I almost threw away lifeline Jesus extended to me. Out of the blue about a year after I lost my job, I got a phone call from an editor at the Birmingham News who knew someone / who knew that I was out of work. The editor begged me to come down for an interview to be their new full-time music critic and arts reporter. "How quaint," I thought, never thinking it was a possibility. "At least I could say I once stepped foot in Alabama." But Bill and I were captivated by the place and its people, and he was able to get a teaching position that allowed us to move. After five fruitful years there, a better opportunity came up for him at Ohio State and we moved to Columbus, where out of the blue--so it seemed--I got the crazy idea to go to seminary. And now here I am.

The point of this Gospel story is not the fact of being rescued, but how the rescue takes place. Note that in the reading, the dangerous storm didn't stop when Jesus took Peter's hand, but only when Jesus got into the boat. There's an old saying that "When you want to walk on water, get out of the boat." But Matthew's gospel tells us it's just the opposite. After all, look at what

almost happened to Peter when he got out of the boat! Human beings are not meant to walk on water. Christians are not supposed to test God. We are not meant to be the captain of our own ship.

The fact is, we get into trouble when we take charge of a difficult situation and force upon it the solution that *we* think is right. We don't go to God and tell God what to do! Instead, God comes to us. Since Adam and Eve took things into their own hands and were banished from Eden, it has been God's desire to come to us, not the other way around. God's movement is always toward us: God giving Moses the law and the commandments; God giving to us his own Son, Emmanuel, God-with-us. He came into our world, as human flesh and blood, to willingly go to his death *for us* so that we may be freed from the chains of sin into a life in which nothing, never, ever, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

It is on the cross where we most vividly recognize that Jesus is, in fact, in the very same boat that we are, suffering at the hands of evil forces seeking to destroy us. Jesus comes to us in the midst of our storms, gently releasing our white-knuckled grip from whatever we're onto for dear life, as he says with the greatest tenderness, "Oh, you of little faith, why are you shaking so? I've got you." AMEN.

