

Aug. 10, 2008, 13<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pentecost: Matthew 14:22-33 (The Rev. Deacon Marcia Tyriver)

As Peter sank into the water, Jesus

“Immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him,

‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ “

How do you think Jesus said that?

How would you read that line?

Angrily? “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Did he be-little Peter? “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Was he disgusted with Peter? “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Was he stern? “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Was he impatient? “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Was he judgemental? “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

I think he would have said it with a smile...and with his eyebrows raised a little...in kindness as if to a child: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

But the thing that impresses me most about this story is the word *immediately*.

“Immediately (Jesus) reached-out his hand and caught him.”

Immediately. Did you get that? Immediately.

Jesus didn’t let Peter flounder and sink down into the water, didn’t let him panic and then **delay** his rescue saying,

“If you had more faith, you wouldn’t be sinking!”

Peter doesn’t have to sink into deep waters, gasping for breath and choking-in mouths full of water, crying,

“Help! Help! I’m sinking. Do something! Help!”

He doesn’t have to fight for his life,

doesn’t have to see Jesus ignoring him or with-holding help.

Furthermore, Jesus doesn’t **want** Peter to “go it alone”.

After all, Jesus *could* have called to Peter,

“Come on, you can do the ‘dead man’s float’. You can stay afloat all on your own till help comes or till the storm stops. Come on, throw your head back, stretch-out your arms, and fill your lungs with air. That’s right...let your legs hang down. See? You’ll sink a little, but the air in your lungs will bring you back up to the top where you can grab a breath .... That’s right, keep your head back, arms out, gasp and hold the air in your lungs, legs drift down, slowly sink. Then rise back up again. You can do it!”

No, Jesus doesn’t coach Peter in self-reliance.

Jesus doesn’t want Peter to suffer.

Jesus doesn’t want to impress a lesson of gratitude on him.

Jesus doesn’t want Peter to be endangered.

No, when Peter cried-out “Lord, save me!” Jesus “**immediately** reached-out his hand and **caught** him.” Immediately.

That's the big lesson of today's gospel...

that when we're sinking and ask Jesus to save us, He will immediately reach out and catch us and carry us back into the boat of life, and the storm will stop.

*"Right!"*, you may think cynically.

Or you may think sadly, "I *wish* that the storm would stop."

We know it's usually not that simple.

Life's threatening circumstances *don't* usually *stop* even if we have faith.

For example, the storms of financial difficulties just don't miraculously stop.

Or, the winds of loneliness or grief just don't disappear once and for all.

The presence of terminal disease and mortality doesn't just go away.

Our concern for our threatened loved-ones is **ever**-present.

Temptations are always present...commercialism, the consuming violence of a world at war, the presence of evil around us.

But we don't have to sink into despair and dysfunction because of these storms and winds.

We don't have to submit to them.

No, we know to ask for help.

We know to cry to God for help.

We know God will immediately reach-out and catch our heart and spirit, and **they** will be held and sustained, consoled, protected...restored.

Again and again, moment after moment we may need to do this.

It works...

**IF we keep our eyes on Jesus.**

That's the other lesson here...to keep your eyes on Jesus.

The reason Peter started to sink was that he shifted his focus from Jesus to the waves, to the wind, and to the storm...all of which were buffeting him, making him tip, making him flail, making him *sink*!

This shift in Peter's focus from looking at Jesus to looking **away** from Jesus made Peter afraid.

"Well, I *guess* so!" After all, he was sinking, and the waters were rising up over his head!

Why do **we** take our eyes off Jesus?

We *want* to have faith. We want to trust and have peace.

But we're human. We become afraid, anxious, or hopeless. That's human.

It's also human to have mixed motives. Look at Peter.

When he said to Jesus "Lord, if it *is* you, bid me come to you on the water",

he was "mixed in motive:

(On one hand) he genuinely (wished) to be with Jesus,

(but on the other hand) he (wished) also to prove that he (could) do what Jesus did;

love and pride in (Peter)...as in us...are strangely intertwined." (p.434, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press)

Yes, it **is** the same with us.

We have faith, but we retain some self-importance in place of humility.

We have faith, but we're also afraid.

We have faith, but we desire a change in circumstance rather than accept the harder but possible transformation in our heart ... the transformation to call for and take Jesus's hand in the midst of the trouble.

It's OK. God doesn't *expect* much else from us humans.

That's **why** Jesus wasn't angry with Peter as he sank....wasn't disgusted or impatient.

God's hope is that we will return, that we will ask for God's help.

His promise is that he will come to us immediately, lovingly, and graciously.

No hesitation.

No judgementalism.

God's embrace is given with mercy and forgiveness, with kindness...immediately.

But the trouble for us is that we are apt to slip away, slip out of his hold...

because God gives us free will.

For example, in **his** lifetime, Peter was going to slip away and sink **again** into the waters of human frailty, wasn't he.

He didn't sink only on that stormy night on the Sea of Galilee.

Peter would sink in the storms and winds of desire for approval.

He would sink in the storms and winds of mob violence around Jesus's arrest and trial.

Jesus warned his disciples that they would all desert him the night of the arrest. Peter staunchly declared **he** would **never** desert. He vowed to give his own life before denying Jesus. (Matthew 26:35)

But again, his motives were mixed, and he caved-in to the night's terror.

Three times that night of the arrest Peter averted his heart from Jesus and denied him.

Three times he gave into the desire for approval and safety of himself instead of keeping his faith and his commitment to Jesus...instead of keeping his eyes on Jesus.

The night of Jesus's arrest, a servant girl in the crowd at the high priest's courtyard said to Peter,

“ ‘You also were with Jesus of Galilee.’ But (Peter) denied it before them all.

‘I don't know what you're talking about’, he said.”

A few minutes later another woman said of him “ ‘**This** fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth:’

he denied it again, with an oath. ‘I don't know the man!’

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, ‘Surely you are one of

them, for your accent gives you away.’ Then he began to call down curses on himself and he

swore to them. ‘I don't know the man.’ “

Three times Peter denied Jesus for the sake of his own safety. He sank in fear, an instinctive act of self-interest. It was an animal-like reaction to perceived personal danger. In doing so, he disowned Jesus. When he realized this, he “wept bitterly”. (Matthew 26: 69-74)

But, again, as soon as Christ could, he reaches-out immediately in forgiveness to Peter.

This time, he reaches out even in **trust** to Peter, even though he knew Peter’s frailties very well.

In the resurrection appearance by the Sea of Tiberias, Christ appears to his disciples.

Christ reinstates Peter despite Peter’s earlier denials.

Three times Christ asks Peter if he loves him, and Peter says *yes*, he does.

Three times then Christ entrusts **Peter** with the care of the disciples, who were to become the church.

Christ tells Peter three things: “Feed my lambs.” “Take care of my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15-18)

And the lesson for us here is the same as before.

When we sink into error, danger, or frailty, *immediately* God will reach-out and catch us, if we give him a chance. If we ask.

He knows, he understands, that we’re apt to sink in the storms of life...

that we are apt to be caught in messes.

He knows that we, in our weakness, are apt to take our eyes off him.

He knows we operate with mixed motives. That sometimes our hearts are pure, and sometimes we “err and stray like lost sheep”.

But he loves us.

He will reach-out immediately and catch us...

even if he has to do it from the Cross.

Keep your eyes on the fact that Jesus gave his life for us because he loves us.

What mess are *you* in?

One of my problems, my weaknesses, is that often I don't realize till quite late that I am even IN a mess.

Are you fighting a storm?

Ask for help.

Then, **keep** your eyes on God.

The storm might not stop, but the storm in your heart and mind CAN stop...or lessen.

At the very least, you don't have to go it alone.

You can be supported....caught and held lovingly and with mercy ...held securely and immediately by God even in the midst of the storm and winds.

Thanks be to God. Amen.