

The disciples are out in a boat, in the middle of the night, on the Sea of Galilee. They've had quite a day: a grand picnic in which everyone was fed, and there even were leftovers. The story of the picnic is the only story that is recounted by all 4 gospel-writers. It means all of them, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all thought that story was really important. This Jesus who feeds: this is key to who he is. He doesn't only attend to something as basic as the growling in our stomachs; it is a meal that includes everyone; he blesses the poor; it is the beginning of a new kingdom, the kingdom of abundance, enough for all. Maybe the disciples are starting to get an inkling about who this is they are following, and what this newness is that is among them.

But for now it's back to what is most familiar to them: a boat, on the water, wind in their hair, water on their faces. This they know. The wind is against them. They are being battered by the waves. This doesn't seem to faze them. It's the ghost-like figure coming across the water. That's what fazes them. They cry out in fear.

And the ghost replies, IMMEDIATELY. The ghost doesn't leave them hanging, wondering. A silent ghost at this point would be all the more scary. No, this one answers their fear, right away: “Take heart, It's me; don't be afraid.” I am interested that he doesn't say his name: “It's me: Jesus.” The Greek words are *ego eimi*: a pronoun and a present tense verb, which translated literally is “I am”. These words echo how God replied to Moses at the burning bush when Moses wanted a name he could use for this voice speaking to him: “I am who I am.” If we are being encouraged to make some connection here between Jesus and the God who talked with Moses, then maybe the walking on water makes some sense. The sea = the abode of demonic forces, where chaos still reigns, and walking on water would be a sign of mastery/lordship over the chaotic forces. God is described in Job as the One who has “entered into the springs of the sea, and walked in the recesses of the deep” (Job 38:16)

The disciples are calmed down by Jesus' voice and then Peter comes up with another idea. Where does Peter get these ideas, anyway? He always seems to be pushing the limits. One minute he is afraid, along with all the others. And no sooner is that fear answered, he is on to the next thing. Do you ever get the sense that if he lived in our time, he would be diagnosed with ADHD? He is impetuous, always on the go, always moving forward, even if it means stumbling because he is just moving way too fast, far beyond his wisdom. Notice what he *doesn't* say. He doesn't say: “Hey, I'd like to do that too!” His interest is not in this trick with gravity, or whatever the trick is. He says, “If it is you, command me to come to you.” Peter is not going to try anything on his own. He is very aware of the power of Jesus' word, and Jesus' bidding. There is no point in this idea if it is not something that Jesus “bids.” And secondly, it's not about a romp in the waves; he is not a wave surfer; it's about getting close to Jesus. That is what Peter always wants, isn't it? To get physically close. He is the only disciple who trails Jesus right up to the high priest's house while the rest flee. Peter is simply so drawn.

Jesus does bid, with just one word: “Come.” Peter slings his feet over the side of the boat and starts walking. Don't ask me for the physics of it. I can't give any. If we read it on a

metaphorical level, Peter is doing what he thinks is impossible. He is doing something that normally would make him afraid. And he is doing it because he wants to be with Jesus. Maybe we occasionally do things like that too: things we think are impossible; things that make us afraid, things that make no sense, because we want to be near Jesus, because he tells us to come, and so we do.

And then something shifts, and it is not the wind. It is Peter's focus. Isn't it interesting. The drama of this story all hinges on what Peter notices. He notices the wind, and he begins to sink. Don't we know the truth of this? The power of the mind to focus has a huge impact on what the body can end up doing. There is likely some interesting bio chemical psycho social neurological explanation.fear affects our hormones and our muscles, and what we fear has to do with what we perceive, and what we perceive has to do with.....what we have experienced, and what we believe. He begins to sink. If we are at all honest, we know what that feels like too.

Psalm 69 says it well: "Save me O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me." Peter is more concise: "Lord, save me."

Jesus immediately caught him. Another translation reads "Jesus grabbed him." I sort of like the verb "grabbed." That's what we need when we feel like we are drowning. We need to be grabbed, and hauled out.

Then comes Jesus' question: "Why did you doubt?" We don't know how or if Peter answered that question. Maybe that is intentional on Matthew's part, to leave the question hanging, to create some space for all of us readers, ever after, through the centuries, to answer it. Why do we doubt?

Oh my goodness. Isn't that obvious? Let us count the ways. Let us enumerate all the reasons why we might doubt. If we were in Peter's shoes, (which would more likely be bare feet at that point ☺) he didn't have some fancy scientific word like gravity, but he does know he has never seen anyone do this, nor done it himself; there is no precedent. And he knows about the bad combination of wind, water, people, the middle of the lake. That's why he doubts. But maybe that's not Jesus' question, really? Maybe it's more: why did you move your eyes off of me? Why did you pay more attention to anything else but me? Ya, why? There's the multi-million dollar question for human history, isn't it? Literally, in a way, when you think of the multi millions that we spend on wars and other things that we think will "save" us, and make us feel secure? Why do we do that, anyway? Isn't that what the story of Adam and Eve is about? Why did those archetypal human beings want anything other than that communion with God? What leads any of us turn their attention to other possibilities?

Let's put on our own shoes. Why do we doubt? What are we even talking about, given that we have probably never received an invitation to walk on water? What are our invitations, and where do we put our focus, and what are we supposed to believe, anyway? I mean, are we supposed to believe that Jesus will calm any storm we encounter, if we just have faith? Is that what this water-walking son of God has in mind? We doubt because we can't know the future, of anything. Especially if we have never been there before, or tried something before. And life is always throwing us curve balls, new situations; where we have never been before. Every moment is a new moment; every moment contains a reason to fear! That's why we doubt!

Maybe the question for us is: where are you going to walk? Where are you going to put your feet? Every day, in many many ways, we have choices about where we will put our feet. Or if we have problems with mobility, let's say we have choices about where we will put our minds, and our words. I mean: it's about ENERGY: where will we put whatever energy we have. We can either see enemies everywhere, fearful things, demons who bring bad things, ghosts from the past, threats (that takes up a lot of energy!) or we can place our focus on One who says "I am who I am" and "Take heart, have no fear." We can choose what to look at, and it makes a difference to us and to those around us. Do we walk only along familiar, well-trodden paths, with our heads bent down, and make our way through life like the prow of a boat cuts through the waves? Or do we explore? Our heads up, our eyes open, looking around, expecting that this person Jesus, in resurrected form, the living Christ, could be ANYwhere, everywhere. There is no place where the demons of chaos can scare the living Christ away: no where! Do we believe that?

Such an awareness does not typically come naturally. Such an ability to stay focused does not come by happenstance. Peter's focus lasted only a few seconds. Ours is likely the same. It is a choice, and a practise, and a desire, to strengthen our ability to stay focused. We know those words, "pray continually"? Maybe that exhortation is about focus: an encouragement to remember, at every minute of the day, in any circumstance, that the living Christ is there, saying: "Take heart. It is me. Don't be afraid." It could become a mantra, that we repeat:

"Take heart. It is me. Don't be afraid."

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Maybe Christ is still saying those words. Maybe they are for us too.

Offered to the congregations of MacNab St Presbyterian and St Paul's Presbyterian, Hamilton, Ontario Rev Cathy Stewart