

10 Pentecost, Proper 14, Yr. A

August 13, 2017

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33

We'll talk more about Jesus walking on the water as portrayed in Matthew's gospel in a minute, but I'd like to start by quoting something from Thich Nhat Hanh who said that the real miracle is not walking on water, but walking on the earth. Walking, first of all in gratitude, but walking in attentiveness to the miracles all around us. Walking with the recognition that it's in God that we live and move and have our being. As you know, we're celebrating Steve and Margaret's 50th wedding anniversary today – 50 years of walking on the earth together and of living in such a way that they have embodied God's presence and God's message – to their families, their friends – to everyone who has come to know them. So, walking the earth, attentively, lovingly, graciously, hand-in-hand.

The Matthew reading has been interpreted a number of ways. After the Enlightenment, readers of this story, with the "nature" miracle it describes, got rather bogged down in the whole idea of miracles – whether they could happen, whether they were real, whether Jesus was really on the shore with the light behind him, etc. I remember Bishop Jacobus talking about being with African bishops at Lambeth who were coming from cultures that firmly believed in ghosts, so Bible study with them ended up with those questions front and center. But I'd like to suggest that another way "in" is to see both the Matthew and the Kings readings as ways to think about fear, about faith and doubt and about how we see and find God.

Elijah first. You'll remember that just before this part of the story, Elijah had had a powerful, spectacular, a kind of walking-on-water experience. He had been contesting with the prophets of Baal about which was the true God and he had invited them to call upon their God to burn the offerings on an altar. They tried and tried and finally gave up. Elijah, when it was his turn, soaked the offerings with water over and over, but even still, when he called upon Yahweh, fire came down and destroyed the offerings. So, Elijah won that contest and won it in a spectacular way. But then he went further and killed the Baal prophets, who worked for Queen Jezebel. The Queen was pretty unhappy when she got wind of all this and vowed that she was going to kill Elijah in turn. So, he goes off into the wilderness which is where we find him in this part of the reading. Now, the prophet who was authoritative, confident, maybe even demanding, is in a cave, both literally and figuratively. He wants out of this prophet business. And then he hears God asking him what he's doing there. It's not a casual question; it's more of a reprimand. You're supposed to be about my business, God is saying, so what are you doing hiding out in this cave? Elijah answers – I've been zealous, I've tried, no one listens anyway and not they're trying to kill me. So God tells him to go out and stand on the mountain because God's about to pass by. But if you read the text carefully, you'll note that he doesn't – instead he stays inside the cave. So God does the spectacular stuff – he sends the wind, the earthquake and the fire. But then there's the silence and Elijah comes out. It's interesting to note that the spectacular stuff doesn't move him (maybe he's had enough of that with the Baal prophets) but the silence does.

But if we look at the Matthew reading, we get the picture of Peter, who's fine with the spectacular – wants to join right in, in fact. I think it's important to note that this story comes right after the feeding of thousands of people with the five loaves and two fish. Plenty spectacular. The disciples are in a boat and a storm comes up. You'll note that the text doesn't say that they're afraid of the storm; after all, they are Sea of Galilee fisherman and have undoubtedly encountered this before. What scares them, though, is seeing this figure coming toward them, walking on the sea. They don't recognize Jesus, thinking it's a ghost. But Jesus immediately reassures them: take heart, it's only me – don't be afraid. That seems to satisfy everyone except Peter who says, "Well, if it's really you, command me to come to you on the water." I think it's worth pointing out that this is often read as reflecting Peter's faith and bravery, but when you think about it, you could also read this as showing a LACK a faith, or at least a lack of recognition: IF IT'S REALLY YOU. It's kind of a strange thing to say, don't you think? He's really asking for proof - why doesn't he ask something about what just happened on the shore, ask Jesus what he was doing last Thursday? Why this? Did he, unlike Elijah, want to witness and to participate in something really spectacular? But Jesus agrees and says, OK then, come ahead. And again, quite unlike the question in Elijah when God asks WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE ELIJAH, here it's Peter, now out on the water, who is no doubt also asking a question: WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

When Peter became aware of the winds and the waves and his own human frailty, he began to sink. Doesn't this remind you of watching a toddler beginning to walk? Mom on one side of the room, Dad on the other, each with their arms extended. And the little one starts off, but at a certain point realizes what's going on, realizes the precariousness of it all and just sits down. It's that point of realization where doubt sets in. The word in Greek means to "go in two directions at once." So, less than a single-minded focus, instead there's distraction and doubt. But it's at that point that Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him and brings him to safety in the boat. Barbara Brown Taylor points out that this story could have had a different ending. That Peter could have stayed on top of the water and the other disciples could have then gotten out of the boat and joined him and Jesus, all of them happily romping on top of the waves. That would be a different story, she says, maybe even a better story, but it wouldn't be a story about US.

Because, like Peter, we aren't single-minded, we are subject to doubt, we waver. We are subject to being afraid. We're afraid because we're pretty fragile and because we're not in control of a lot of stuff that affects us. We're afraid because, in the words of a poster I once saw, THE SEA IS SO VAST AND MY BOAT IS SO SMALL. It's said that faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin and all we have to do is to be sure that our faith stays a nose ahead of our doubts. But one could also argue that fear is also the flip side of faith. Fear and anxiety can sink us, to stay with today's metaphor. And they can also blind us to God's presence. God's presence – because what we want, most of all, I think, is the sense, the recognition, the reassurance, that God is with us. I spoke at the Docks-ology service this past week, out on the Anderson dock. There, surrounded by all our Door County beauty, it was easy to remind everyone of the story of Jacob – remember when he had that dream that showed a ladder stretching from earth of heaven, with angels going up and down? And more important, remember that when he woke up he said SURELY GOD WAS IN THIS PLACE AND I DIDN'T

KNOW IT. Jacob called that place Beth-el, which is Hebrew for the House of God and there's the insight, the deep truth that the whole earth is the house of God and there are ladder prints everywhere. Most often the presence of God doesn't show itself in the spectacular and it often shows itself through other humans, acting as God's agents.

I'm sure you've read that old story about the fellow caught in a flood, who's taken refuge on top of his roof, where he's praying like mad for God to come and save him. First a neighbor comes by in a canoe and offers him a ride, but he refuses because he's waiting for God. And then there's someone in a motor boat, but again he refuses. Finally, a helicopter hovers and lowers a rope and again he refuses. So he dies and when he gets to heaven, he berates God for not saving him. But God says, in self-defense, what about the neighbor and the motor boat and the helicopter. The message there is twofold – that God uses human agents to help us AND that whenever possible, we are to be those human agents for others. Frederick Buechner says somewhere that “we have within us, each one, so much more of God's power than we ever spend. Such misers of miracle we are; such pinchpenny guardians of grace.”

I think these scriptures challenge us to ask a couple of questions: WHAT IS IT THAT WE REALLY WANT? Do we want the spectacular? Do we want certainty, so as to avoid doubt and more crucially, avoid the need to trust God? I'm going to submit to you that what we REALLY want and what we really and finally need, is the knowledge of God's presence. And most often that will come to us through other people.

When I was at Parkland Hospital doing my required Clinical pastoral education, the director of the chaplain's office said something I've never forgotten – when terrible things happen to people, most everyone will want to run away. But if you can stay and say to them, I will be here and I will walk with you through this, you're giving the greatest gift one human can give to another. I read a story about a young woman dying of AIDS with her family all around her. She told them that she didn't want them to say anything, that she knew they all loved her. She said, “Just be here with me and hold my hand.” When somebody takes your hand in the dark you're not afraid of the dark any more. The message of Christianity is that Christ has each of us by the hand and that, while the power of the dark is great, the power of light and life is greater still.

What we want and need most of all is the reassurance that God is with us, that he has us by the hand, that he'll never let go.

Amen.