

Following the feeding of the five-thousand, Jesus sends the disciples off in a boat, and once again goes off by himself to pray. Jesus' prayer is always linked to one of his mighty acts in Matthew's gospel, and it's important for us to notice that as we try to understand what is happening.

A few years ago, when I made my pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I was able to take a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. It's pretty big and the waters can be affected by winds and storms. Which is exactly what the disciples experienced. I'm sure being caught in a storm caused them some anxiety, but that was nothing compared to seeing a figure walking toward them on the water. They were terrified. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Immediately Jesus spoke out to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter isn't always seen in a favorable light. And this could be another example of his failing. But that's not what I'm noticing this time around. Instead, I'm marveling that Peter was willing to risk getting out of the boat, to join Jesus in those turbulent waters. It won't be until after Jesus' resurrection that he becomes the kind of disciple Jesus knew was possible, but he sure gave it a good try in this moment.

The problem arose when Peter's focus shifted from Jesus to the winds and the waves. Peter begins to sink and cries out, "Lord, save me!" and Jesus does. We can't know the tone of Jesus' voice when he says, "You of little faith, why do you doubt?" so we don't know if Jesus was admonishing him or teasing him. But faith and the courage to follow Jesus are inextricably linked.

The well of faith is not the same as a well of water, which can dry up. There is nothing finite about faith. Faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. Faith will not fail us; only a shifting focus will fail us. Doubt is what gets in the way. And why do we doubt the one who quiets the storms of our lives in ways we can barely imagine. Peter risked everything to join Jesus in the turbulent sea. Jesus often calls us into uncharted waters and he never abandons us. If we can believe that, hang on to that, there is no reason to doubt.

Baptism reminds us we have been beloved of God from the beginning of creation, our way is lit by the light of Christ, and we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit to be all that God calls us to be.

But, in baptism we also enter into the turbulent sea. We make promises, that with God's help, we need to keep. We promise to continue in the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers; to seek and serve Christ in all persons, love our neighbors as ourselves; persevere in resisting evils of every kind; strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. What a different world we would be living in if we could just do all that. And, in fact, when we try, it feels like we're swimming against the tide, so countercultural is all this. But trying is how we step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters.

I must admit I resonate more with the disciples who stayed in the boat than with Peter who took a risk these days. Far from just a turbulent sea, it feels like we're living through a hurricane, tornado, thunderstorm, and earthquake all at once. The climate has changed; that's turbulent enough, but we're confronted with war on multiple fronts, racial injustice, political strife, and a collapsing

economy. These are anxious times and my prayers more often than not resemble Peter's than Jesus'.

Every time we have a baptism we all renew our own baptismal promises, and I realize, and hope you do, too, that the deep and infinite well of faith is more than enough to sustain all the ways I try. Yes, I'm anxious, and sometimes my anxiety gets the better of me, but there is no need to fear that the turbulent sea will get the better of me. Jesus is right there, and will pull me into the boat to safety. And so, today, I find myself admiring Peter.

Times like this will surely test our faith. They are supposed to. William H. Willimon reflected on this gospel this way, "I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith." Ernest Campbell, pastor of Riverside Church says, "The reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it." Truly and intentionally living into our baptismal promises is just the way to deepen our faith.

Now, I want us to notice the difference between Jesus' prayer and Peter's. Peter prays in the midst of a storm. Jesus takes the time to pray when it is calm. Jesus prays for strength to accomplish the hard things God calls him to; Peter prays to be saved from the hard things. Which way should we pray?

I believe we can endure whatever storms come our way. We can rise above them, "walk on water" as long as we keep our eyes on Jesus, and maybe pray all the time, not just the stormy seas.