

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year A, Proper 14
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O God, be good to me. For the sea is so big, and my boat is so small. Amen.

As I sat across from the parish search committee, I felt as though I had done a truly good job of interviewing for this potential church job. I was young and new, but enthusiastic, and once in a while, a situation all comes together when it's a good match.

So the final question in the interview didn't throw me—"What is your favorite saint?" they asked. "Tell us why!"

This is easy for me. Peter. I love Peter, I am a Peter girl. Peter, who is so determined, and yet so imperfect; Peter, who, the minute he gets something right, immediately finds a way to stick both feet in his mouth and jangle the whole thing up. Peter, who holds both deep faithfulness and a pervasive insecurity about how this whole Jesus thing is meant to be, and gets really good at, as we say in our household, "trying again better next time". He is the saint of the do-over, the saint of the imperfect, the saint of deeply fallible, distractable humans.

So I say all this. *And then I continue talking:*

"But Paul," I continue. "I don't get him. He's confident, driven, convicted in a way which isn't completely familiar to me, and he just keeps going and going, and I'm not sure I can love a saint who can convert in a heartbeat, and just doesn't mess up all the time."

The good search committee of that church, *St Paul's*, had a sense of humor, but no, dear friends. I did not get that job.

I clearly pulled a Peter on that interview. And I stand by everything I said that day, if not the timing of it.

Peter is nothing, if not the most consistent disciple in our Gospels—he gets a new lease on life and authority in the Book of Acts, where he's leading the church in Jerusalem, but that doesn't diminish his radically almost-not quite there capabilities in the rest of scripture. Peter who tells Jesus he won't die; Peter who tries to set up a tiny house community situation on the mountain for Jesus, Moses and Elijah during the Transfiguration; Peter, who denies Jesus not once, but three whole times—LITERALLY right after Jesus gives him the heads up that there might be some pointed inquiries coming his way.

Peter is nothing if not voted the ‘least likely to obtain the keys to the kingdom’ in his high school yearbook. Which is why this moment on the water is so perfectly Peter. So perfectly inane, and misguided.

The scriptures tell us that both Jesus and the disciples were taking a bit of time apart—from their ministries, and yes, if you noticed it, even from each other. It is night when Jesus comes down from the mountain and heads towards the sea to catch up with his friends. He appears, as a ghost or as an apparition walking across the water when his already terrified disciples see him. They call out to him, and he identifies himself immediately—“Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid,” he says.

In much of our scripture when we hear the phrase ‘be not afraid’, it signals to us that a change is going to happen—and inward and outward shift for the recipient of that greeting, one which will require much trust in Jesus. The hearers of this part of the gospel know what is coming next—Jesus’ invitation to them, along with a moment of solace and affirmation. When Jesus tells us to not be afraid, usually we see the writing on the wall, take a breath and settle in for the ride, because we know it’s going to be an interesting one. And just to make it clear to the disciples, Jesus even adds in a few more assurances—Take heart; It is I; do not be afraid. That threefold affirmation is more than enough for most people.

But in this gospel, Peter is not most people. *And Peter just keeps talking.*

“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Nothing says faithfulness like a little bargaining in the midst of a storm.

I want to be convinced that Peter was being faithful in asking Jesus for walking-on-water powers, but I truly believe that Peter was terrified. And in his fear, of the storm (although—please remember that the majority of these disciples were fishermen, so this can’t have been his first bout of bad weather on the water), or of Jesus’ words, or in the fact that Jesus didn’t stop the storm on the ocean, but came to the disciples in the middle of it—in Peter’s fear, he begins to negotiate with Jesus. If you are real, make me walk on water.

It is ludicrous to imagine this happening, but fear will make you say and do things which are, in fact, ludicrous. And Peter knows fear at this moment.

There was a book written on negotiating a few years ago¹ and the researchers noted that in most cases, humans spent 30% of their time thinking about the past, and 70% of time thinking about the future, and almost no time considering the present. That heavy emphasis on future outcomes affected the fight or flight instincts in the subjects repeatedly—the anxiety on an outcome was

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kwamechristian/2021/09/21/3-steps-to-overcome-negotiation-fear/?sh=15376ce11cf6>

prevalent, which obscured fully appreciating the varied options and opportunities before the individuals.

In focusing their energy only on future outcomes, the individuals negotiated reactively, often making choices from a place of fear of the ‘what if’, rather than operating from the present moment. They limited their options and shut down opportunities as they did this, even as they assumed they were doing the interior calculations regarding the resilience of their decisions looking into the future. When they negotiated reactively, they only were able to see a slice of the reality and opportunity put before them, and therefore aim with a similarly narrow vision.

The opposite of faith, you may have heard, is not doubt. It is certainty.

And there is a similar corollary: the opposite of love is not hatred. It is fear.

Peter is afraid, friends. I want to say that he’s afraid of the storm on the sea, but I’m mostly sure that he’s afraid because Jesus isn’t stopping the storm for the disciples on the boat, but only coming across the water to accompany them into it. Peter is afraid because the Jesus he has known and loved and followed these many months isn’t the same form as the apparition—in Greek, *phantasma*—who greets him and the others on the water. He wants fleshy, hand-holding Jesus to grab on to, not wispy, floaty Jesus.

I mean, don’t we all want fleshy-hand-holding Jesus some days? The Jesus who will hand us a tissue when we need it, or if you are out of tissues, will head to the bathroom and grab the roll of toilet paper? When we are worried that Jesus will not appear, we find ourselves asking for proof of Jesus’ own love for us—Jesus’ own presence. If you are real, God, then make this work out. If you love me Jesus, then make this happen (or not happen). If this is of you, God, then make me do something impossible.

Peter’s desired outcome, walking on water, is narrow enough to not quite work out the way he had imagined it. Make me overcome fear, he says to Jesus. Jesus says, Come. And Peter walks, until he understands that fear will always be there, just under his feet, appearing ready to swallow him as soon as he looks down. And that is when Peter at his overconfident worst, becomes Peter at his best: Lord, save me, he cries. Lord, save me.

When fear traps us, we see too little and we seek too little. Of ourselves, of each other, and of God. Peter, in his fear, asks for power to overcome the elements. But power only gets us, and him, partway. What allowed him to rise was not power, but his cry to Jesus—save me. Help me. I can’t do it alone. And Jesus immediately reaches out for his hand. Peter finally gets fleshy, hand-holding Jesus in that moment of trust.

Peter, the messer-upper, the least likely, the foot-in-mouth disciple holds the keys to the kingdom, Church. He is the one on whom the church was built, the cornerstone, our first bishop. Peter, who couldn’t see Jesus for the waves, until he was under the waves himself (if you have

seen the Barbie movie, imagine Peter as horse-focused Ken, and not discovering that he is Ken-nough just yet). Peter who believes power is in control, rather than power in trust— and winds up again and again discovering the deep humility that comes when you choose love over fear, and faithfulness over certainty.

Even Peter, founder of the church, can't walk on water. Neither can we, none of us here in this room can. But we can cry out 'Lord, help me' when the waters get too high. We can practice responding to fear of the future by noticing the grace of the present. We can recall that even Peter, in all of his imperfection, in all of his fear and doubt, *even when he kept on talking*, was beloved, beloved, beloved of Jesus—and you, WE, are each invited to walk in those imperfect footsteps as well. Hopefully just not always in job interviews.

Amen.