

August 7, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

## Faith and Fear

Psalm 105:4 *Seek the Lord and God's strength; seeks God's presence continually.*

Matthew 14:22-33 *But when [Peter] noticed the strong wind, he became frightened....*

The story of Jesus walking on the water is not about a miracle. It is about the nature of faith and what it means to live by faith. Jesus did not want people thinking he was a miracle man. In the Bible, water always represents chaos and threat. In Genesis 1, God's spirit hovers over the chaotic primeval waters, poised to contain them with boundaries of the continents. The psalmist cries out to God when the waters of threat or danger are rising up around him. Jesus' walking on the sea is a symbol of his closeness to God and his confidence in God's power over all that threatens life. Jesus believed his disciples also had the capacity to walk calmly on stormy waters. Why else would he invite Peter to give it a try? Faith is about living in the midst of life that is sometimes frightening and chaotic, but without fear, staying focused on what we are called to do and how we are created to live. To me, that is the heart of this story.

The story begins as Jesus sends the crowds and his disciples away. He needs time alone, to be with God, to assess things, to listen inwardly for God's word and leading, maybe just to be quiet. This is what we call the inward journey. Jesus had just lost his friend and mentor John the Baptist, executed by Herod Antipas. A good, truthful man, destroyed by the political system and all its corruption. Then there was the feeding of the great crowd with a few loaves and fish. So many people out there hungry for guidance and for food. And all the people seeking some leader who promises them something, eager to attach to a guru, a rabbi, a spiritual teacher, rather than find "it" within themselves. The disciples are great, of course. They have left everything to follow him, but they are still not getting so much of what he is about. They are kind of high maintenance. With all of this going on, it is easy to lose your bearings, who you are and what you are really called to do. So, Jesus needs a retreat!

Jesus goes up on a mountain by himself to pray, and stays until almost dawn. Meanwhile, the disciples are in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, which is known for sudden squalls. Now they are caught in one, tossed to and fro. Jesus does not rush to their rescue; he continues his retreat. How can that be? All of this suggests that there are

times when we, just like Jesus, need to send everyone away, as it were, and discipline ourselves for inward journey time, time for the practicing of silence, inner listening, quietness of spirit, and openness to God. This is not escape or running away from life. It is keeping ourselves rooted in who we are in God and what we are called to do.

I have noticed that a frequent reason conscientious Christians give for NOT taking time for their inward journey each day or extended retreat time, is that they feel guilty about it. It feels selfish to take time away from the children, the job, the problems of the world, whatever. The thing I've also seen is that if we DO NOT take this time, if we do not work faithfully with the discipline of an inward journey, we make little difference in the world around us. And we add to the mess our own fears, anger, hurts, all the things that control our behavior if we are not growing in awareness and understanding. How do we expect to live as those who know we are God's beloved children, and treat others that way, if we do not take seriously the time needed for being fully aware of it, not as an idea, but as a reality? We end up having all the rhetoric of our faith -- peace, forgiveness, justice, compassion, and so forth -- but it isn't real in how we see life around us and how we speak and act toward others, beginning with those closest to us.

So, first of all, the story speaks to us of the importance of making our inward journey a priority. We are to live out of the peace, joy, sense of direction, and power we receive from a consistent time apart so that our own relationship with God is deepened and clarified. If it was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for us!

So, finally here comes Jesus walking across the water to the boat in the misty light of morning. The disciples are terrified. They think he is a ghost. Then, in typical Jesus fashion, the first thing he says is, Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. I think this is the most central message Jesus has for his followers -- Do not fear. Here we are at the heart of the story.

To see if it is really Jesus, Peter asks to also walk on the water. "Come on," says Jesus. Peter steps out of the boat and, sure enough, he starts walking on water, just like Jesus. Then something happens. His attention wavers. He starts noticing the wind and the waves and the chaos around him and beneath his feet. And he starts sinking. He cries out to Jesus, and Jesus reaches out for him and lifts him up out of the sea. Then they get into a boat, and the wind stops, and all is calm again.

Now Jesus says an odd thing, when you think about it: You of little faith, why did you doubt? What does doubt have to do with it? We thought doubt meant questioning certain religious doctrines, like whether Jesus really was born to a virgin, or whether

Jesus really healed all those people, or whether God wrote every word in the Bible...that sort of thing. The church has made a big deal out of that stuff, while missing the whole issue of what it means to live faithfully.

That was not what caused Peter to sink. He got distracted by the wind and waves, the scary things around him. THAT was what Jesus called doubt. It has nothing to do with having intellectual questions about things. It is about fear and losing focus and getting distracted. It is about taking our eyes off Jesus, the life of discipleship, the life of faith. It is about living in a world--human world, that is--filled with violence, hate, greed, self-centeredness, lack of justice and compassion, all the things that seem to dominate our society and political leadership. And it is so easy for us to see it and become filled with fear or hate or despondency. We start to sink! Why? Because we have taken our eyes off Jesus. Because we have let our fears dominate us. And this is largely due to our having drifted away from the practices that can keep us rooted and grounded in what is really real and good and true, what is of God.

It is about looking to Jesus, keeping our spiritual eyes on him, his teachings, the life he manifests, which is our true humanity. That is why our community has always lifted up the importance of a commitment to the inward journey, to practices that can keep us grounded and growing in God, in who we are in God, and in what God has called and gifted us to do for the world. We all get scared and we all sink, again and again. The important thing is regaining our focus, getting back to the things that will root us in life, in love, in joy, and in the knowledge of what we each can offer in the service of life. Doubt has to do with our fears and distractions and how we work with them so that they lose their hold on us.

Recently I started back to my yoga practice, which I abandoned a few years ago. Mike Cundiff is my teacher, whom some of you may remember from his work with the Wood Ministry. I love the balance poses, not because I'm good at them but because of what I learn. When you are trying to stand on one foot while doing other things with the rest of your body, sheer effort does not work. It has to come from your center, both physically and spiritually. It has to be with lightness and lifting and breathing, not the straining of muscles or mind. And the eyes have to be calmly resting on a point in front of you. You can be aware of everything around you, like how solid the person next to you is and how shaky you are! But you don't have to be distracted by it. With simple awareness joined with easy and calm focus, you can stand there for a good long while. Unless you have a bad hip like mine!

The story is not about Jesus performing a miracle. Or about us performing a miracle. I like what Thich Nhat Hanh is fond of saying: The miracle is not to walk on water, but to walk on this beautiful green earth with awareness, with joy. The point is to live our lives without fear, or without letting our fears dominate us. In that way, we can live as God created us to live and as Jesus calls us to live. We can move forward with what we feel God has called us to do, being mindful of issues to be addressed, obstacles overcome, but without being overwhelmed so that we give the thing up before we begin. This is something for each of us, as individuals or as mission groups, to spend some time with: What are the fears that keep us from living with love, with peacefulness, doing what we feel most deeply called to do for the world? When we become aware of and understand our fears, where they are coming from, what they are attached to, they already lose their force. This is another reason why the inward journey is so important.

A few years ago I traveled with Kaye on one of her work trips to Portland, Oregon, where I visited the Japanese Garden. My favorite thing was the large stone and sand garden. [I have brought a picture of it for you to see.] It is rectangular, filled with smoothed small white stone. There were several large stones placed so that they seemed to look toward the very large standing stone. I learned that the garden represented a Buddhist story. A mother tiger drove her cubs into the sea so that they would learn to survive on their own. The Buddha saw the struggling cubs and came down to stand in the sea, to be their source of strength. This reminded me so much of the story of Jesus and the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, and other stories, too. Jesus does not do it for us, but he stands as our strength, the one to whom we look--his life, his teachings, his spirit--as we find within ourselves, in our own lives, the way to live without fear as we do the things he calls us to do, as we live the life to which he points us.