

August 10, 2014 / 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 really about a miracle, at least, not in the way we might think. It is about what faith means and what it means to live by faith. Jesus did not want people thinking he was a miracle man. The so-called miracles were signs of something else, of God's reign over life, what Jesus called the kingdom of God. The important thing is awareness of the everywhere presence of God and living our lives in harmony with it, even when everything around us seems chaotic, hopeless, or fearful.

In the Bible, water represents chaos and threat. In Genesis 1, God's spirit hovers over the chaotic primeval waters, poised to contain them by setting the boundaries of creation. The psalmist cries out to God when the waters of threat or danger are rising around him (Pss. 18:16; 69:1; 124:1-5). Jesus' walking on the sea is a symbol of his closeness to and trust in God whose power is over all that threatens life. Jesus believed his disciples also had the capacity to walk calmly on stormy waters. Otherwise, he would not have invited Peter to give it a try. Faith is about living fully in the midst of life, without fear, staying focused on what we are called to do and how we are created to live.

The story begins as Jesus sends the crowds and his disciples away. He needs time alone, to be with God, to listen inwardly for God's word and leading in quietness and solitude. This is what we call the inward journey. Jesus has just lost his friend John the Baptist, a good, truthful man, destroyed by the powers of corruption and violence. Then there was the feeding of the crowd with a few loaves and fish. So many people hungry for physical and spiritual nourishment. The disciples are great, of course. They have left everything to follow Jesus, but they are still not getting what he is about. With all of this going on, it is easy to lose your bearings, a sense of yourself and what you are really called to do. So, Jesus needs a retreat.

Jesus frequently goes off to be alone with himself and God. We get the sense that this is the root and wellspring of who he is and what he is about. It suggests to us that the commitment we make to daily times of our inward journey is primary and essential. Without cultivating the capacity to be inwardly quiet and peaceful, without becoming aware of our inner life in a non-

judgmental and self-understanding way, without listening, in the midst of all the competing and fraudulent voices around us, for the Voice that tells us who we truly are, what we are called and gifted to do and be—without our own “going to be by ourselves”, we drift, become lost in activism or confusion, never knowing the true joy and nature of our lives and what we have to give. That is why this community has always emphasized the importance of what we call the inward journey. It is the mountaintop to which we go as the sustaining root of the outward journey work to which we give ourselves.

While Jesus is on the mountain, the disciples are in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, caught in one of its sudden squalls. If he is aware of his disciples' peril, Jesus does not rush to their rescue. He continues his retreat until morning (literally, the “fourth watch” of the night, between 3 and 6 am). Does it surprise us that Jesus does not seem compelled to respond immediately to every need? There are other similar instances in the gospels. In John's gospel, Jesus gets word of the illness of his friend Lazarus, but he “stayed two days longer in the place where he was” before going to Bethany (11:1-6).

A frequent reason given for NOT taking time for the inward journey each day or for extended retreat times is that we feel guilty about it. It feels selfish to take time away from the children, the job, the problems of the world, whatever. I have seen that if we DO NOT take this time, if we do not work faithfully with the discipline of an inward journey, we tend to add to the situation 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 and others are God's beloved children if we do not take the time needed for being fully aware of it, not as an idea in our heads, but as a real awareness in the core of our being? We have all the rhetoric of peace, forgiveness, justice, compassion, and so forth, but it isn't real in how we see life around us and how we actually live. That Jesus does not always “rush to the rescue” also speaks of his utter trust that there is a greater Care at work in life than his own efforts. He knows what he is called to do, and he entrusts the bigger picture to God's everywhere-present love and power.

So, first of all, the story speaks to us of the importance of making our inward journey a priority. If going to the “mountain of solitude in God's presence” was important for Jesus' life and ministry, then we can assume it is at least as important for us.

Now Jesus comes walking across the water toward the boat in the indistinct light of dawn. The disciples are terrified. They think he is a ghost. The first thing Jesus says is, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Jesus is always saying that to the disciples, and to us. Here we are at the core of the story. To see if it is really Jesus, Peter asks to 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 he starts sinking. He cries out to Jesus, who holds out his hand, and the two of them get into the boat. The wind stops, and calm returns.

Now Jesus says an odd thing. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" What does doubt have to do with it? We thought doubt meant questioning religious doctrines and teachings, like whether or not Jesus really was born to a virgin or did all those miracles, or whether the Bible was verbally dictated by God, and on and on. The problem is that the church has made a big deal out of that stuff, while missing the whole point of what faith actually is, calling and helping people to understand and live faithfully, that is, trustfully and without fear. Peter got distracted by the wind and waves, the scary things around him. THAT was what Jesus called doubt. Faith has nothing to do with holding unquestioningly to a set of religious ideas. It is about living without fear or losing focus on what is most important. It is about keeping our eyes on Jesus, on the life of discipleship, the life of faith. It is about living confidently and lovingly in a human world filled with violence, hate, greed, self-centeredness, lack of justice and compassion, all the things that seem to dominate the human world.

Faith 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 simple spiritual 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 have to offer in the service of life. Faith has to do with our fears and distractions and how we work with them so that they lose their hold on us, so that they no longer keep us from living as we were created to live.

When I was practicing yoga, I enjoyed the balance poses, not because I'm good at them but because of what I learned. 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 done 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 calm focus, you can stand there for a good long while. Unless you have a bad hip like mine! To me, this is another image for what faith is—calm, trustful, peaceful living in the midst of all the things

that can make us fearful and despairing.

The story is not about Jesus performing a miracle that makes him some kind of spiritual super- hero. It is about what faith means, a way of living that we see in Jesus and that he believed we are capable of, are created for, and to which he calls us. Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese teacher, writer, poet, and peacemaker, is fond of saying that the miracle is not to walk on water, but to walk peacefully 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 for others, for the world, mindful of the difficulties, challenges, and obstacles, but without being overwhelmed. 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, when we talk about them with others, they already lose their force. This is another reason why the inward journey is so important, as individuals, as mission groups, and as a community.

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 white stone. There were seven large stones placed so that they seemed to look toward the very large standing stone. Usually, rock and sand gardens do not represent a story, but simply invite meditation. I learned that this garden is based on 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, so that the cubs could look to the Buddha and lose their fear. This reminded me so much of the story of Jesus and the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. 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. This is what it means to live with faith.