

**Tenth Sunday After Pentecost Year A (9 August 2020)****Lectionary Reading: Matthew 14:22-36**

I wonder how many of you can remember learning to ride a bike. I must confess I can't, but I can certainly remember teaching our kids how to, particularly Nicole and Stephanie. By that time we were living in a small country village outside of Colchester and running along the length of the village green was a long straight path, ideal for the task! I can see it clearly even now, the many hours spent... the gentle push, the furious peddling of little feet, the running alongside, hands ready to catch them if they fell off, and the shouts from the other end of "don't look down, don't look down, look ahead, look at me, look at me." Balance didn't come easy at first, the bike didn't always go in a straight line, and there were of course the inevitable spills and tears. But eventually when they learned to focus their eyes on the path ahead, and not down at the pedals the task was mastered.

Today, in our reading from Matthew's gospel, Peter had a similar experience – except that rather than trying to ride a bike, he's trying to walk on water. Indeed, looking at how Peter reacted in situations throughout the Gospels, I'm not sure he would have made a good cyclist – not at first at least. Many times, he seemed to be focused on the here and now, rather than looking at the bigger picture.

The events here at the end of Matthew 14 occur right after Jesus' miraculously feeding of the five thousand. The gospel says, "Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other

side.” Jesus would meet up with them again. First, he was going to take some time by himself to pray.

As morning dawns the disciples find themselves battling a ferocious headwind, but they can handle being tossed about by strong winds and waves. Been there, done that! It’s not the weather that frightens the disciples but rather Jesus – who seemingly out of nowhere – comes “walking toward them on the Sea.” Terrified, the disciples cry out “It’s a ghost!” but Jesus being Jesus, immediately calms their fears. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid,” he says to this community of bumbling — but beloved — disciples.

Of course they were afraid. Who wouldn’t be? Well, maybe not Peter. At least, not at first. Impetuous, enthusiastic Peter, always rushing into things, saying what others are only thinking, doing what others would not dare, jumping overboard, attempting his tip-toe on the water and pulling off an amazing stunt, if even just for a moment. But when Peter shifts his focus from Jesus to the wind that still whips around him — fear finally overcomes him too, and in his fright he begins to sink. “Lord, save me!” he calls out. And needless to say, this Jesus promptly does, reaching out his hand and catching him, hauling him out of the cold water like a big, frightened fish and dragging him over to where the other disciples can pull him into the boat, but he also asks him this sobering question: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

It’s at this moment while Jesus remarks on Peter’s lack of faith, that the disciples see Jesus as if for the first time, confessing, “Truly you are the Son of God.” Which is interesting, when you

think about it. I mean, Jesus had just fed thousands upon thousands of helpless and vulnerable people, revealing both divine power and divine compassion. And yet it's here, at this moment of extremity, when the disciples perceive most clearly who Jesus is.

This story of Jesus walking on water and Peter attempting to do the same and falling down when he fills with fear, is very relatable to us. Many of us know from experience that the waters of life are not always calm. Things can get decidedly very choppy....

There have certainly been times when I have found myself hanging on to the rails of the boat, being tossed by the wind and waves of life as I go through some deep and stormy seasons of my own – and like Peter, even though I believe that I am in God's hands and that they are good hands, I too have been afraid, I too have doubted. The truth about us is that like Peter, we trust and fear, we walk and sink, we believe and doubt.

To return to the imagery of the bicycle, Peter lost his balance when he took his eyes off of Jesus in front of him and focused instead on the wind and waves and what was happening right around him. When we take our eyes off Jesus, we, too can lose our balance and our ability to see the path he has laid out for us.

But the story doesn't only tell us about ourselves, it also tells us about God. This in two ways. First, no matter what it is that reminds us of our need for God, God responds. Just as Jesus reassures the disciples and reaches out to grab hold of Peter, so also God responds to us with compassion and support.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, God not only responds to our need, but actually desires that we seek to live lives of abundance and courage. Notice that Jesus actually commanded the disciples to cross the sea to go ahead of him, trusting them to navigate both sea and storm.

I'm also struck by Jesus' three-fold response to the disciples. First, he urges them to "take heart." Second, he reveals his presence with, among, and for them. For while we translate what Jesus utters as "It is I," the Greek is more sparse, succinct, and significant: "I Am." In the Old Testament, God gives us a number of names to call him by. But a big one is simply "I am". God sends Moses to the Israelites to tell them that he'll rescue them from their slavery in Egypt. "Suppose they ask who sent me to them. What shall I say?" God's answer: "Tell them 'I am' has sent me to you." That name for God comes back a number of times. And then we find Jesus on the lake. "Take courage! I am. Don't be afraid. I suspect that neither the disciples nor Matthew's audience would mistake the pronouncement of the divine name.

Third, having revealed his presence and identity, Jesus then encourages the disciples once more to leave fear behind and live "whole-hearted" lives.

And I think this is *still* God's desire for us. God desires, that is, that we trust that God is with us and for us and thereby live with courage and hope, taking chances, risking ourselves in relationship, seeking the welfare of the individuals and community around us, all the while remembering that God is always there.

The faith that we allow to be rooted in Jesus lifts us above the waves and calms the winds. So let us be the hand of Jesus extended to others. And let us always keep our eyes on the Jesus who calls us to him, to exercise our faith, to rise above the difficulties of this world and strive to bring about the kingdom of God.

The Lord be with you.

