

Pentecost 10A. August 13, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. I Kings 19:9-18, Psalm 85:8-13, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33.

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

28 Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' ²⁹He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Some years ago, my friend Jeanie was suffering about as much as her husband John. His cancer treatments made it almost impossible for him to talk, to swallow, to hear, even to breathe.

I saved her most poignant emails – written from across the country -- because they depict an incredible depth of feeling. Early on she wrote, "I can't seem to get a grip on my fear, even though I have been praying a lot."

Jeanie is like many people in the Bible, like many of us. Elijah, in our first lesson, although faithful in prayer, feared for his life. He went to a cave to spend the night alone, wondering what God had in store for him. Jesus in our Gospel lesson has just fed 5000 people, but he goes up to a mountain to pray alone, as he still grieves the horrible death of his cousin John the Baptist. Jeanie walked the halls of the cancer center wondering about the people who kept telling her everything happens for a reason – she beat her brains out trying to figure out what that reason could possibly be.

In Elijah's story the strong wind, the earthquake and the fire come and go and the Lord is not there. For Jesus' disciples, the wind is against them, battering their boat in the dark, frightening night hours – much like the storm-tossed infant church for whom Matthew was writing. Jeanie despaired of the medical doctors being able to promise her anything.

All the things we want to trust – Elijah's wind and fire symbols of God's presence, helpful forces such as wind for a sailboat, or the doctors who are truly wise and good – all these things CAN fail us. The realities of Elijah's, the disciples' and Jeanie and John's danger seem to triumph.

What haunts each of them – and perhaps you and me as well – is the terror of death. "They are seeking my life," says Elijah. The disciples think they are about to cross into the realm of the dead, "It is a ghost!" they cry. And it's what Jeanie and John feared, young in the prime of their lives.

Peter sees Jesus in the midst of his terror but doesn't believe it is he. Even though Jesus uses those telling words, "It is I," *ego eimi* -- the Greek words used for the Hebrew name of the Almighty God -- Peter flip-flops between faith and unfaith. We know that feeling too.

If Peter had had more faith – and common sense-- he probably would have stayed in the boat, confident that Jesus was close at hand. His job WAS to maneuver the boat to the shore, not to walk on water. But Peter wanted a miracle; then, he thought, he could really believe. He wanted proof and he wanted it HIS way.

Jesus, however, never used miracles to prove his Messiahship. Our faith is not based on miracles either. The miracle stories are simply signs that point us in the direction of God's realm, show us God's good will for us.

But like Peter, like Jeanie, we pray for miracles. Jeanie wrote what Peter also might have said, "I'm so afraid that if I give up all my fear and all my doubt and just try to put total trust in God, what if I'm let down big time? I ... want a miracle. When I see [John] in pain, I feel so let down."

+ + +

Remember, it was Peter's idea to walk on the water....in his desire for a miracle, Peter challenged Jesus to prove to him that he is there. "Lord, IF it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Once out of the boat, Peter starts out o.k. but soon he sees only the waves and wind – not JESUS! Elijah stood at the door of his cave seeking God and saw God neither in wind, earthquake, nor fire. You and I have prayed for much that is not granted. Like Elijah, Peter, Jeanie, we can think that even God is against us – if there is a God.

+ + +

Another of Jeanie's emails reads, "I am so confused, does God have the power, is there a plan?"

As a pastor and as her friend, how I wished I could answer her! Could answer the many people who have asked this, could answer my own doubts and fears with some concrete sign or "miracle."

For Jeanie the cancer hospital became, in her words, "hell on earth." As Peter sank into the hellish water – water he believed was churned up by demons – he was sure he would drown and cried out in both faith and desperation, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.

That's the key sentence in this story. Jesus reaches out his hand to Peter and to Jeanie and John and to you and me.

In the hour of the disciples' need, Jesus has come to them. When the wind was difficult and life was a struggle, Jesus was there. I have to believe that in Charlottesville, this weekend, people of faith found Jesus to be there.

Jesus' entire mission on earth was to rescue drowning sinners. He came to us in the suffering world terrorized by death, a world of little or no faith. He himself died a sinner's death. **And was raised to new life!** In God's righteous and generous grace, we drowning sinners are forgiven and raised to new life as well. **We need no greater miracle than this!**

When we are grasped by Jesus, when our ears are opened by the Holy Spirit to hear with faith his promise of "it is I, do not be afraid," then the things that terrify us – and there are plenty – no longer define our reality. Instead we bow in gratitude and joy, "Truly you are the son of God."

Elijah received his word from God in the "sound of sheer silence." The disciples saw the wind cease and the waves become flat. I wish I could

say that for Jeanie and John, but their struggle continued, while all the while they rested in God's arms. Jesus' presence does not mean an end to the struggle. Elijah and the disciples continued to struggle, but with renewed faith. Since God is for us, as Jesus shows us in this story, the waves of life-threatening illness or our insurmountable problems no longer threaten to destroy us.

Matthew's story was meant to bring hope and give the followers of Jesus courage in the road that lay ahead. And this story gives hope and courage to today's followers as well. We don't need to understand HOW someone could walk on water, nor do we need to try to walk on water – do impossible things -- but in this story we see the awe and enthusiasm of the early Christians who loved Jesus and knew his power in their lives.

+ + +

Sometimes we miss the point. For example, there once was a call committee interviewing a candidate for their new minister. "What are we going to do?" asked George. "It's a woman!"

"Let's take her fishing," suggested Pete. "We can figure out if she's any good."

Out fishing, Peter cast his line and immediately snagged on a log. The woman pastor got up, walked across the water, and unsnagged the line.

"Just like a woman," muttered Pete. "Can't swim." ☹️

+ + +

It won't take a miracle to find a new pastor for our church, and no candidate will walk on water.

If we had no other story of Jesus, this one would suffice. "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." These words are echoed in every celebration of Holy Communion. "It is I."

We are not called to walk on water. We are called to stay in the boat. Steady the sails or row! Stay with the cancer patient, stay with the challenge, whatever it may be. We may never witness our own personal miracle – sadly Jeanie and John did not – but it's miracle enough that we have been baptized into the life and death of Jesus!

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. And be present with all the Jeanies and Johns, with all who struggle. For your great love's sake. Amen.