



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 10
Proper 14 (A)

Why Did You Doubt?

[RCL]: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Today, in Matthew 14, we find Jesus' disciples terrified on the Sea of Galilee. It's certainly not the first time. The disciples are no strangers to this lake. Actually, they're out on it all the time. Even before Jesus called them to fish for people, they fished here *for fish*, no doubt risking life and limb for a good catch.

A quick look back at chapter eight reminds us of one traumatic experience they had not so very long ago. You may recall the story: A windstorm arises, so strong that the boat is swamped, and it begins to sink. Scared to death, the disciples yell to Jesus, who is fast asleep in the back, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" Jesus responds calmly, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he gets up, rebukes the wind, calms the sea, and the disciples are amazed.

Today, however, it's not the weather that frightens the disciples. By now, they can handle being tossed about by strong winds and waves. Been there, done that. No, today they are frightened by something else—an eerie figure walking toward them on the surface of the sea. "It's a ghost!" they cry, but Jesus reassures them. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Alas, these comforting words (let alone the ability to defy gravity) do not quite satisfy Peter, who seeks further proof of Jesus' identity. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus agrees, "C'mon." And so, Peter does. But after just a few steps, the wind startles him and he begins to sink, crying, "Lord, save me!" Of course, Jesus does save him, but he also asks him this sobering question: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Jesus' question is a different version of the same one he asked back in chapter eight. It's *déjà vu*—right here in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Make no mistake, these questions are just as much for us as they were for those early disciples.

So, why *do* we doubt? Jesus calmed a storm with his voice, fed five thousand people with only a few loaves of bread, and walked on water. In light of all this, why would we ever lack faith?

Well, one answer is *fear*. Like the disciples, sometimes storms pop up in our lives and scare us half to death. That's what storms do. It's only natural for a dog to hide under the bed when he hears thunder; for a child to cling to her mother when she sees lightning; for the driver to pull over when he can no longer see the road.

But it's not just wind and rainstorms that scare us; so do the metaphorical storms of our lives. Things like global pandemics, contentious election cycles, horrifying diagnoses, economic downturns, and relational discord can shake us to the core. In the midst of difficult setbacks like these, it's not uncommon for anyone to doubt their faith in God. That's exactly what happened to Peter in today's gospel, and it's exactly what the disciples did in chapter eight. All Jesus does is ask why. Like any good teacher, he already knows the answer to the question, but he wants us to know it, too.

Simply put, it's because we are human. Fear is, quite literally, instinctual. Humans are wired with a fight-or-flight response. We have this reflex for a reason. When our lives are in jeopardy or—more commonly for us today—when our identity is threatened, we are naturally inclined to react in fleeting ways. When that happens, we tend to leave calm, rational thought behind. For that reason, we often need some assistance getting back to a more faithful frame of mind.

Anyone who has ever taken a public speaking class knows that one of the things you learn is how important it is to engage the audience. Speakers have many tools for doing this, but perhaps the most important is the rhetorical question. Rhetorical questions engage audience members because asking a question gets listeners to think of their own answers. And as they do, they become personally connected to the subject in question.

This is to say, Jesus is not asking his rhetorical question, “Why did you doubt?” to shame Peter. Jesus is not in the shaming business. Instead, he uses the question to get a frightened Peter to focus on what's most important. And in the realm of life's storms, faith is more important than safety. Faith is the foundation of human life, as important as food, water, and shelter. Only after faith is secured can safety add value to living. This is the message of the Cross. This is the message of Jesus' whole life. And faith is what Jesus wants Peter—and all of us—to focus on when storms come.

Jesus' question prompts us to realize that faith is always within our reach. In other words, even in the stormiest times of life, when we most doubt our ability to make it through, we can remain faithful to God. Staying faithful to God doesn't simply mean going through the motions. It doesn't mean saying the creed while thinking about a shopping list, or repeating Bible verses from memory. It means for us, just like Peter, refocusing on our commitment to faith.

We will not always be perfectly faithful. Doubts will creep in, but the important thing is to recover from those doubts and return to a place of faith. Our faith is strengthened and sustained by our relationship with God and nurtured by participating in our life in Christ through things like reading scripture, praying, and

attending worship. Speaking of, each Sunday when we confess our sins, we admit that we don't always get everything right, but we repent and recommit ourselves to walking in God's ways once again.

Repent and recommit: This is the nature of the Christian life. Peter is a prime example of what it means to live a life of holy imperfection. He has misunderstood before, and he will misunderstand—and even deny—again. But today, we see him refocusing on faith (with a little help from Jesus, of course). Watching his journey reminds us of our journey, a journey on which we can—and should—choose faithfulness. And a journey on which we, just like Peter, repent, recommit, and refocus on a faithfulness that comes from the knowledge and love of Jesus, through whom we have experienced the grace of God time and time again.

The Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson is a priest of the Diocese of West Missouri, currently serving as associate priest of Southeast Tennessee Episcopal Ministry (STEM), a system of four yoked congregations in the Diocese of Tennessee. Warren is also Visiting Instructor of Rhetoric at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn. His research interests include queer theology, homiletics, and American presidential rhetoric. Warren holds both Master of Divinity and Master of Sacred Theology degrees from The School of Theology in Sewanee, where he resides with his husband, Walker. Together they enjoy lingering back-porch conversations, racking up frequent flyer miles, and doting on their niece and nephews from afar.