

August 9, 2020
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 14:22-33

After he had fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone.

Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. At once (Jesus) spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how (strong) the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" After they got into the boat, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

Background:

The events that Matthew records leading up to this gospel text are: the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:3-12) and the feeding of five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21). Verses 22-23 suggest that the disciples boarded the boat, the crowds were dispersed, and Jesus then climbed further up the mountain to spend most of the night in prayer.

The text itself appears to be a fairly simple unfolding of events, but consider that there may be more here than that. Matthew records only two other occasions where Jesus goes off by himself to pray. The first is just a few verses earlier (Matthew 14:13-14), when Jesus learned of the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. "When Jesus heard of it, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns. When he disembarked and saw the vast crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them and he cured their sick." (Matthew 14:13-14). The other time comes at the end of his life, when he leaves his disciples to go into the garden of Gethsemane to pray. (Matthew 26:36-46).

Each of the four situations described in today's text is a very brief description of a much richer experience of what is taking place beneath the words. While Jesus spends most of the night alone in prayer, the disciples are out in the boat, probably fishing. The taxes for a fishing permit were high and kept the average fisherman in debt. It would be unlikely that a successful fisherman would pass up the opportunity for a night of fishing. The Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Gennesaret, is well known for its sudden and severe storms. Verse 25 says that Jesus appeared on the water during the fourth watch. The fourth watch is from 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. When Jesus comes to them, the disciples have been out on the water fishing presumably most of the night. It is also possible that they have been battling against the storm winds most of that time. First light would permit one to see objects on the sea, but not in detail. Also, in the world of the disciples, it is impossible for anyone to walk on water. So when they see Jesus coming toward them on the water, it is not surprising that they would presume this is a ghost.

Jesus, walking on the stormy water, presents himself as one who is greater than the mighty evil forces of chaos that threatened the existence of people of the day. Water was a symbol of life because it was needed to sustain life. At the same time, it was feared because of the destruction that occurred when rivers and lakes raged out of control. By walking on the water, Jesus is demonstrating that he has the power to subdue the chaos of the water, and to subdue the fear of the disciples in the boat, who think that Jesus may be a ghost. Jesus comes to establish peace in creation, both on the stormy waters and in the hearts of those who are in the boat.

Peter may have been reassured and felt confident by the reassuring words of Jesus, or perhaps he was uncertain it was truly Jesus who approached on the water. Either way, Peter asks that Jesus order him to come to him on the water. And so it is ordered. Peter begins to walk, but when his attention shifts to how powerful the chaos seems to be about him, he begins to sink. Peter calls out for help, and immediately the hand of Jesus is extended to lift him from peril and bring him to safety and peace.

The last two verses describe the scene in the boat. Jesus and Peter join the disciples who apparently have witnessed all of this while they themselves were still being tossed about on a violent sea. After Jesus and Peter join them, the sea, the wind, and the water are calm, and the disciples pay Jesus homage by stating, "Truly, you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:33b)

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your experience of water, both as life-giving and as a force of destruction?
2. Have you ever been physically exhausted and feared for your life? How did that circumstance affect your ability to act rationally?
3. Have you ever felt like you need to be alone with God?
4. Why would Peter want to get out of the boat and walk toward Jesus?
5. Have you ever been willing to leave your present situation in order to pursue some new opportunity, relationship, or life situation?
6. How does fear affect your relationships with others and with God?
7. Have there been times when your relationship with God vacillated between fear and confidence? How did that shifting back and forth affect your overall relationship with God?
8. Who in this gospel text do you most identify with?
9. Can you take some time to talk to God about your relationship with God as you reflect on this text?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the Readings for August 9, 2020, the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

At the mountain of God, Horeb, Elijah came to a cave where he took shelter. Then the Lord said to him, "Go outside and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will be passing by."

A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord — but the Lord was not in the wind.

After the wind there was an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake there was fire—but the Lord was not in the fire.

After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound. When he heard this,

Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

I will hear what God proclaims; the Lord proclaims peace.

Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him, glory dwelling in our land.

Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss.

Truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven.

The Lord himself will give his benefits; our land shall yield its increase.

Justice shall walk before him, and prepare the way of his steps.

Brothers and sisters: I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie;

my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness

that I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart.

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ

for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.

They are Israelites; theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants,

the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs the patriarchs, and from them,

according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

After he had fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.

When it was evening he was there alone. Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it.

During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear.

At once Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus.

But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught Peter, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

After they got into the boat, the wind died down.

Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

Excerpts from 1 Kings 19:9A, 11-13A; Psalm 85:9-14; Romans 9:1-5; and Matthew 14:22-33