

August 13, 2023
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:

Last week the church celebrated the feast of the Transfiguration. The church assigns special readings for the feast that replace the readings for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary time. The Gospel for the 18th Sunday briefly mentions the death of John the Baptist, and then it records Jesus being moved with pity for the crowd and feeding the five thousand men with five loaves and two fish.

The text itself appears to be a fairly simple unfolding of events, but consider that there may be more here than just what is presented in the narrative. Matthew records only two other occasions where Jesus goes off by himself to pray. The first is just a few verses earlier, 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 are brief descriptions of a much richer experience taking place beneath the words. While Jesus spends most of the night alone in prayer, the disciples are out in the boat, perhaps 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. The text says 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 most of the night. It is also possible that they have been battling against the winds of the storm for some 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. 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 threaten the existence of people of the day. Water is a symbol of life because it is needed to sustain life. At the same time, it is feared because of the destruction that occurs when rivers and lakes rage 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 be reassured and feeling confident by the reassuring words of Jesus, or perhaps he is uncertain it is truly Jesus who approaches on the water. Peter asks Jesus to order him to come to him on the water. 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 are still being tossed about by the 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 are your experiences 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. What are some reasons why Jesus might want to send the disciples away and then dismiss the crowds?
5. Why would Peter want to get out of the boat and walk toward Jesus?
6. Have you ever longed for an experience of a powerful God in your own life?
7. Have you ever become aware of fear affecting your relationship response to God's presence or response to God's desire for you?
8. What in this Gospel resonated most strongly? Can you take some time to talk honestly about those feelings and how those feelings impact your relationship with God?

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

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscclalledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the Readings for August 13, 2023, 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

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for August 13th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the Gospel from Matthew, Jesus walks on the water to the disciples in their boat as they are tossed by the wind and the waves. Challenged by Peter, Jesus tells him to come to him, and Peter walks too on the water, toward him, until becoming frightened by the wind. When the two get into the boat, the wind dies down.

The other readings also have references to the winds, and to the nearness of God and his salvation to all who choose to accept him. In the first reading from 1 Kings, the Lord passes by Elijah on the mountain, not in the strong wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in a tiny whispering sound. Psalm 85 proclaims, "Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him," and with it are kindness, truth, justice, and peace. In the second reading, from the letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "My own people, the Israelites; theirs are the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is the Christ."

These readings remind us that the Lord is near, especially when there are fearsome things going on. He extends invitations for us to draw near, and sometimes they are more clear and direct than others. The Lord said to Elijah, “Stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will be passing by.” The Psalm says, “The Lord himself will give his benefits. The Lord’s salvation is near; glory dwelling in our land.” Paul writes, “My conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness; Christ is over all.” In the Gospel, Jesus sent the disciples in the boat to precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After going by himself to pray, he went to the disciples. He knew where to find them, and he went to them.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!

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."

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

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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
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For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ
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They are Israelites; theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants,
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