

Matthew 14:22-33

So much has changed in our lives during this time of the Coronavirus Pandemic...working from home, or in reconfigured workplaces, or having no job at all. We are preparing for virtual or in-person preK-12 and college classes, but with in-person classes and extracurricular activities requiring social distancing and perhaps wearing masks. We are experiencing abbreviated, delayed, or otherwise postponed sports seasons; as well as cancelled, reduced capacity in-person gatherings, virtual meetings; and more. While many of us are thankful that we can connect with family and friends via the internet or other technological means, many of us are feeling the separation one from another, and it is affecting our happiness.

Recently, I heard on a WKBT television 8 news report, that Michele Obama is exhibiting signs of a "low-grade depression." She is not alone. Other news reports have mentioned the increase in the number of persons who are exhibiting anxiety and stress. Given all the changes that are going on in our lives these days, this is not surprising! But, I do hope that people are seeking help from medical and other healthcare professionals if they are having these feelings. I also hope that they are praying, reading the Bible, and asking God for help.

Our gospel passage for today is a continuation of last week's pericope. You will recall that Jesus had heard the news of the death of John the Baptist. Jesus was seeking a place of solitude and quiet, perhaps to grieve John's death and to pray. But Jesus was quickly discovered by the crowds. Rather than to take time for himself, he had compassion on the people and began healing them. Later, he miraculously fed them, too.

This week, we hear that Jesus is taking the time to rest, to regroup, and to pray to God the Father. Jesus has sent the disciples to a boat on the sea, and he has retreated, as he often does, to a mountain. We recall when Jesus sought a place of quiet in the garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed not one or twice, but three times, until he was at peace with his impending death on the cross.

Like Jesus, there are times when we too need to go to a place of quiet where we can rest, regroup and pray. Doing so can help quiet our restless and weary souls. It can help us to feel connected to God, too, especially during our times of anxiety, stress and depression. God hears our prayers and gives us healing through reading and hearing scripture, too. For this, we can be thankful.

Once Jesus leaves the mountain, he goes to the disciples, but not in the way that we would expect. He

walks on the water! What an amazing demonstration of Jesus' power! When the disciples see him, that think he is a ghost, for they know that walking on water is impossible for human beings. But, Jesus is fully human and fully divine. With Jesus, all things are possible.

Perhaps you recall as a child, trying to figure out how Jesus could walk on water. Perhaps you went to a stream, lake or pond, and attempted to walk on the water, yourself! But, you soon realized that for human beings, it is impossible to do so without God's help. I remember during a Vacation Bible School week that I helped teach a few years ago, that by using a narrow trough and filling it with cornstarch and water, the children, for a few seconds, were able to feel like they were walking on water. It was an enjoyable time for them, but we know that there was no special substance helping Jesus to walk on the water in our gospel passage. There was no gimmick, no magical or other trick that allowed Jesus and Peter to walk on the water. It was completely and totally due to God's power.

During my early seminary days, I served a church in Illinois, part-time. The women's group participated in many projects throughout the year, much like our W-ELCA group. They also periodically, selected Christian books to read and discuss. One book that they read was, If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat, by John Ortberg (2001, Zondervan). The title is of course, referring to our gospel passage for today. The author, through using this title, is comparing Peter's walk on water to calls that we receive from God that require our "getting out of the boat." Ortberg states,

...let Peter's walk stand as an invitation to everyone who, like him, wants to step out in faith, who wants to experience something more of the power and presence of God. Let water-walking be a picture of doing with God's help what I could never do on my own. How does such a thing come about? There is a consistent pattern in Scripture of what happens in a life that God wants to use and improve:

* There is always a call. God asks an ordinary person to engage in an act of extraordinary trust, that of getting out of the boat.

* There is always fear...It may be fear of inadequacy...It may be fear of failure...It may even be fear of God.

* There is always reassurance. God promises his presence.

* There is always a decision...people must decide.

* There is always a changed life. Those who say yes to God's call don't walk the walk perfectly...they learn and grow even from their failures. And they become part of his actions to redeem the world.

Those who say no are changed too. They become a little harder, a little more resistant to his calling, a little more likely to say no the next time. Whatever the decision, it always changes a life--and it changes the world that little life touches." (Excerpted from pages 9-10)

What has God called you to do, that you are or are not doing? What is keeping you from "getting out of the boat"... fear of inadequacy, fear of failure, or even fear of God? What decision(s) have you made in response to God's call? Did you say, "Yes?" Did you say, "No?" Did you do nothing? Like all decisions, doing nothing is a decision that leads to positive, negative or other consequences, too!

Perhaps we are like Peter, who begins his walk on the water with confidence, but as the storm rages and the winds blow harder and stronger, we panic. We do not see how we can finish this walk on top of the water. As our feet sink, as our thoughts sink, as our hopes sink, we do not believe that we will be able to keep going forward on top of the water.

These emotions may express the way that many of us are feeling today as we consider our lives during this time of the Coronavirus. We feel like we are in the midst of the storm, the rain, and the heavy winds. We are trying to stay on top of the water, while so much in our lives is changing and shifting on an almost daily basis. We may ask, "How can we think of stepping out of the boat during this time?" And yet, that is what God is calling us to do. To step out in faith, to seek the help that we need to address our own fears, anxiety, stress and perhaps even, depression. To step out in faith, rather than to hold tightly to the sides of the boat. To step out in faith, knowing that when we do, our lives will be changed, because God has called us and we have answered. God has encouraged us to take those steps of faith, and to do something to further God's kingdom. Taking these steps could mean taking some risk, but God is with us.

God is with us each and every step of the way. God is with us as we get out of the boat, as we take our first step, as we continue to walk toward the goal, even when the storm rages, the waters swell, and the winds blow. God is present with us! God will not leave us or forsake us.

Like Peter, God is calling us, leading us, guiding us, toward the intended goal. Through the one, Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we can accomplish what God has called us to do. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, our hearts can be filled not with fear, but with God's grace, peace, and love, so that we can do God's will. God is our Creator, God is our Redeemer, God is our Sustainer. Let us listen to God's call, and get out of the boat, with faith in our hearts, knowing that God is with us this day and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.