

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

August 13, 2017 Pentecost 10/Proper 14/Year A

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

I'd like to talk about Jesus today. Now you might be thinking, "Sure. No problem. What's the big deal? This is church. We always talk about Jesus here." And that of course is true. We refer to him a lot in our liturgy. We read about him in the gospels. I talk about him in sermons. And we all know in the core of our hearts that, as Christians, we are in some sense Jesus people. Jesus is what it's all about for us.

But our gospel passage this morning is nothing if it's not an invitation for all of us to reconsider Jesus, to give him another look. Or, to put it more poignantly, it's an invitation not just to talk about Jesus, but to walk toward him, to connect with him as a real person. If this is beginning to sound a little too much like one of those "touchy-feely" churches, if you're beginning to wonder if next I might ask you if you have a personal relationship with Jesus, if you're beginning to think this may be a little too "low brow" for sophisticated Episcopalians, well perhaps therein lies our challenge. You see, today Jesus is inviting us to come closer to him, to walk toward him.

Our story is a familiar one. We might entitle it, "The Boys in the Boat." Why not? In fact, scripture contains lots of stories of people in boats. There's Noah and the Arc. There's Jonah. There's Paul getting shipwrecked. And there are all these fisher-folk going out in their boats to earn a meager living. Navigating the sea was and still is a prominent part of life in the Mediterranean world. And, it turns out, it's a prominent part of the life of faith.

Today's story is also told in Mark. But Matthew gives it a unique twist, which we'll get to in a moment. The story follows immediately on the heels of the story of the Feeding of the 5000. Jesus has been trying desperately to get a moment alone to pray. That's where he's going when he notices the hungry crowd and his compassion for them stops him in his tracks. He turns around, faces them, and gives them food that satisfies their hunger. After he dismisses the crowd, he turns back to resume his search for a quiet place to go off by himself and pray. He even dismisses his disciples. Get into the boat, he says, and go to the other side of the lake. I'll meet you there later. Finally he is alone. And he spends the evening in prayer.

Meanwhile, the boys in the boat have been tossing about in the waves all night. The wind has picked up, the water is crashing over the sides, and their anxiety is rising as they struggle against the wind. Early in the morning, after a night of turmoil, they look up and see what they think is a ghost walking toward them on the water. Perhaps their exhaustion has gotten the best of them and they're hallucinating. Regardless, they all see it, and they understandably are terrified. The apparition calls out to them from the early morning mist. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." It is the familiar voice of Jesus. But how can it be? We left him back on the shore for a quiet night alone. And who ever heard of anyone walking on water? They don't know what to make of this. But they know they are terrified.

And here's where Matthew's version of the story departs from Mark. Peter, foreshadowing Thomas of doubting fame, demands some proof that it's really Jesus. So he calls out, "If it really is you, Jesus, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus obliges. "Come," he says. So Peter, not wanting the others to think he was just bluffing, leaves the boys

in the boat, tenuously takes a step out onto the water, and begins miraculously to make his way toward Jesus. It's really happening. Jesus and Peter are walking toward each other. Closer and closer they come, the turbulent sea churning beneath them. Jesus' face is coming more fully into Peter's view. Peter yearns to get closer. Closer. Yes, it's really him. There can be no doubt. The ghostly figure is coming into focus. It's Jesus coming toward him.

But then Peter drops his eyes and looks down. The wind and the waves have caught his attention and he starts to panic. He takes his attention off of Jesus and immediately begins to sink into the raging sea. "Lord, save me! Save me!" he cries in desperation. And Jesus reaches out his hand and pulls him up from the darkness. "You of little faith," he says to Peter. "Why did you doubt?"

Why do any of us doubt? It turns out that doubt, on this side of eternity, is simply part of the dynamic of faith. It's normal to wonder if it's really Jesus walking toward us. The Gospel even attests to that. Think of all those post-resurrection stories. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus who don't recognize Jesus until he is revealed in the breaking of the bread. The disciples who, after the resurrection, think they're seeing a ghost. Mary Magdalene who thinks he's the gardener. All of them are people who knew Jesus well. And yet they can't believe that he's really present among them. And here the boys in the boat also let doubt get in the way of their perceiving who is actually walking toward them. They imagine they're experiencing something else, a ghost, maybe even a figment of their imaginations.

But also recall the story of the man whose son is possessed by a violent spirit. He cries out in his distress to Jesus, "I believe, Lord; help my unbelief." He's expressing the universal truth that all he has to offer in the end is his desire for faith. His faith itself might at times be shaky and unsure. But he desires it nonetheless. That is the same desire, the passion, the energy that impels Peter to step out of the boat and begin to walk toward that faint image of Jesus he sees in the distance. It's the same desire that impels us to come toward the altar each week.

I am caught by that powerful preposition in this story, the word, "toward." In the midst of their distress, Jesus walks *toward* the disciples. Jesus is always walking toward them. And he's always walking toward us.

And Peter, wanting desperately to believe that it's really him, taps into his desire and walks *toward* Jesus. He's really doing it. He's really responding to his heart's desire. He's walking closer toward Jesus.

I believe that, deep down, all of us have a desire to get out of the boat and respond to Jesus' invitation. "Come. Walk toward me as I walk toward you. Let us meet even on your life's turbulent waters, even in the turbulence of your faith. Keep your eyes up. Don't panic. I'm here coming toward you. And I will catch you if you start to sink. Come toward me. Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."