

# Sermon

## Proper 14, Year A

### August 10, 2008

by *The Rev. Norman Bray*

May our eyes catch fire and see God, May our ears catch fire and hear God, May our minds catch fire and know God, May our tongues catch fire and name God, May our hearts catch fire and love God." +++

There is an old story that has been retold many times, especially in the Eastern Orthodox part of the Church, about the very devout abbot of a monastery who decided to take a long spiritual retreat in a small cabin located on a remote island in the middle of a very large lake. He told his fellow monks that he wanted to spend his days in prayer so that he might grow closer to God. For six months he stayed on that island, seeing no one, no one seeing him, no one hearing from him. But then one day two monks were out strolling along the shore of the lake, working on their tans, and as they looked out over the water they could see a figure in the distance moving toward them. As the figure got closer they could see that it was the abbot, walking on water. Sure enough, he walked across the lake and walked right by the two monks without saying a word. One of the monks said to the other "after all this time, the abbot is just as stingy as ever." The other monk was puzzled and he replied "What do you mean? The first monk said "Walking on water? The ferry is only a quarter!"

Humor aside, this story is intended to illustrate how easy it is for us to miss something remarkable when it happens right in front of us. It is the kind of thing that happens when we hear this story of Jesus walking on water and Peter having to be saved from his own impetuosity. I expect that those of you who have heard this story many times have usually heard it preached as a story about faith, or rather Peter's lack of it, and how if we just had enough faith then we could walk on water. I cannot count the number of times that I have heard that sermon, and until a few years ago I could not imagine that you could say anything else but that. If Peter had only had enough faith, he could have walked alongside Jesus right across the top of that lake. Does that sound familiar? Is that the lesson that you expect to take away from here today? I have bad news for you if that is what you expect and the bad news is that I think that the "Lack of faith" sermon is the worst thing that could be preached from this Gospel. The worst!

I suppose that now you will want some kind of an explanation of that. You are probably not willing to take my word for it and just trust that I am telling you the truth and that is a good thing. You should not believe what I say just because I say it from this pulpit; you deserve to understand how I could come to such an outrageous conclusion and to be able to understand we have to go back to the beginning, back to the very beginning. Back to Genesis 1:7 "So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so." In the Old Testament water represented "chaos" and was feared by all of Israel. Now, don't get me wrong, everyone was not afraid of water. Water is life in the arid eastern Mediterranean region and everyone knew that, but they also remembered the story of the creation of the world, when God imposed order on the chaos. And they remembered the flood, when God used the power of water to cleanse the earth, and they remembered the stories of Leviathan in Job and the Psalms, that awful monster of the deep that God created for sport. Do you recall any stories of Israelite sailors? There aren't any. The ocean was too scary but the Sea of Galilee, that was manageable. It is small enough that you can see across it and we know that Peter and James and John were fishermen, quite familiar with the sea and with boats, so when Jesus tells them to get into the boat and go across the lake nobody makes a fuss. This is something that they do all of the time.

Jesus doesn't go with them because he needs some quiet time, some prayer time. He had just gotten word that his cousin John had been beheaded and this was the first time that the crowd had let him have some peace. He had been preaching, teaching, and healing for several days and it was time to recharge and the way that Jesus recovered his strength was through prayer. There is a lesson there and we will get back to it shortly.

Right now we have the apostles in the boat headed for the far shore and Jesus praying on a mountain, apparently most of the night because our text says that he came walking toward them early in the morning. The original translation was "in the fourth watch" which puts it between 3 and 6 AM. The apostles are having a tough time making any progress because the winds are against them and the waves are beating them up, the boat battered by the waves. The Greek word is actually "tortured" and I think that paints and even bleaker picture than "battered." As bad as it was, the gospel does not say that the apostles were frightened until they saw Jesus walking across the water, and then they were terrified. So terrified that they cried out "It is a ghost!" Think about that for a minute. Imagine yourself in a small boat, in the middle of a storm, in the dark or just barely becoming light, and you see someone walking across the lake. What would you think? Who could it be? It is not the abbot in the story, he hasn't been born yet. Who could it

be? The problem for us and for the apostles is that it is not possible for human beings to walk on water. We live in a physical world, a world that God created and a world that apparently has some rules which we have not been able to circumvent. This world operates through the rules of physics and biology and geology and meteorology and all of the other ologies that we study in school and one of the things that we know is that we cannot walk on water. Remember that, it will be important in a minute or two.

Jesus responds to their fright immediately and the words that he uses are important because they reveal something about Jesus. Jesus said ""Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." We should probably have these words above the door of every church because they are powerful words. Take heart, do not be afraid, I AM, Jesus' words here go right back to the words of Yahweh to Moses at the burning bush. I AM who AM. Powerful words from Jesus on a stormy sea to his frightened apostles huddled together in a small boat being tossed on the waves. What about that boat, does it mean anything in this story? Where are you sitting right now? Look up; look up at the ceiling, what does that look like? It looks like we are sitting underneath a boat that has been turned upside down. You are sitting in the nave of the church. Nave is from the Latin word *navis*, for boat. You are sitting in a boat, the boat is the church and that is the same boat that the apostles are sitting in and the storm is all of the troubles in the world that assail the church, both at the time that this Gospel was written and today. And we should remember that the apostles were fine in that boat, doing what Jesus had told them to do, until they saw him walking across the water in the dim morning light. Then Jesus reassures them, take heart, I AM, do not be afraid, and we get Peter's famous words "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Take a moment here to try and get Peter out of your head because it is not necessarily Peter, he is a character that could represent any of the apostles or any one of us. The person is not important but the words are because they are the words of the evil one, they are the words of the powers and principalities, they are the words of an unbelieving world. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Do those words sound familiar? They should because we heard that same voice speaking similar words back in chapter 4 when Jesus was just coming out of the desert after 40 days of fasting and prayer and the Tempter came to him and said "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." And then that same voice said "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Can you hear that same voice saying "Lord, if it is you command me to come to you on the water?" It is the voice of evil trying to put Jesus to the test, asking for proof of what Jesus said with that "I AM," proof that Jesus is God. Of course Peter sinks into the waves. He sinks for 2 reasons; the first is that we cannot walk on water. That is impossible in this world, it is not possible for humans to transcend the laws of nature and walk on water. The second reason is that the storms of the world are always in our view, always on our minds. By ourselves there is no respite from the battering of the world but when Jesus reaches out his hand and helps us back into the boat, then we can find peace, peace to worship God in the midst of the community of worshipper, here in the church.

This is not a story of a lack of faith on Peter's part. If it was then it would set every one of us up for a life full of shame and guilt because none of us have the kind of faith that we should, all fall short, but God has never intended us for shame and guilt. If we take this as a story of a lack of faith then we would all be thinking that if we had only had enough faith then we could have cured our father's cancer, we could have cured our mother's ills. If we had enough faith then our brother would never have fallen in with that bad crowd and gone to prison for murder, if we had only had enough faith. No, this is not a story about a lack of faith, it is a story about a world that wants God to prove God's self by submitting to a test. It is a story about a world that is engulfed in a storm and it is a story of the church that rides out that storm accompanied by Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer. The lesson for today is not "If you only have enough faith" because we know that faith as small as a mustard seed is more than sufficient. The lesson for today is "Get back in the Boat!" In the boat is where we can safely ride out the storm in the fellowship of Christian believers. In the boat is where Christ sits among us. In the boat is where we worship in the apostles words "Truly you are the Son of God." Three years ago I preached on this Gospel in the church of St. John the Evangelist in Robertsedale Alabama, our home church, and after I had figured out where today's sermon was going I went back into my files to see what I had said 3 years ago and I was not surprised to discover that the message has not changed. The message in the first century, when this gospel was written, the message 3 years ago and the message today is all the same. "GET BACK IN THE BOAT!"

Amen.