

WATER WALKERS

Last Thursday, I felt like AAA, giving all kinds of travel advice to our morning women's group as they prepared for a trip tomorrow to northern Michigan. In that vein, I'd like to encourage all of you: if you're ever up in Mackinaw City on a Sunday evening, be sure to take advantage of Arnold Transit's Vesper Cruise.

There is no charge for the trip although the co-sponsor, the Church of the Straits, takes freewill offerings. An extra large ferry leaves the dock just after 8 p.m. and heads for the Mackinac Bridge as the passengers sing familiar hymns and praise choruses. It is one of the rare times you can go underneath the Mighty Mac and look up at the structure. The ferry then turns around in Lake Michigan and heads back under the bridge toward the docks – but not before it takes one last turn so you are parallel to the bridge as the sun sets behind it, which makes for some awesome photos.

When I was pastor at Horton Bay United Methodist Church, we'd take a group of 20-30 people up once a summer for the vesper cruise. What I really appreciated about the experience was the insight it gave me into this story about Peter.

Down in Indiana, the largest bodies of water we had around us were a few swimming pools and birdbaths. So as a child, I imagined Peter walking on the water flat as a pancake. I know, it says in black and white that there was a terrible storm. But I just envisioned the clouds being dark and thunder and lightning in the distance – and the water as still as can be.

On one of the vesper cruises, I looked over the rail and saw the waves, and realized the boat was going up and down and back and forth – and that was when it was calm.

Dave says that was nothing to being on the Great Lakes during a real storm. A year after the November gales that claimed the Edmund Fitzgerald, Dave was working on a cement boat

that came into a horrendous storm on Lake Superior. The waves were over 25 feet high. The captain ordered the engines on full steam ahead, plowing forward as fast and hard as they could into the storm. They sailed like this for 24 hours, during which time the ship lost three miles. (As soon as they docked, Dave found a job on solid ground!)

Peter gets a lot of snickers from us as we tell again how the waves caused him to start to sink. But give Peter his due: He did something none of the other disciples did. He got out of the boat. He had faith enough to know where he would find the one who had power over the fiercest of storms.

Immediately before today's scripture, Jesus had sought refuge at the Sea of Galilee. He had been informed of the death of his cousin John the Baptist, and he sought to escape the crowds if only for a few hours. But when the people saw him heading across Lake Galilee, they followed on land and arrived ahead of him. Having compassion for the people, he healed their sick. And then he performed the miracle of feeding five thousand men, plus the women and children, with just the few loaves and fishes they had on hand.

At the end of this miracle, Jesus compelled – that's the word Matthew used – compelled the disciples to board the boat and head across the sea without him. Maybe he was insistent upon them leaving his presence so that Jesus could finally find the refuge he'd been seeking. He goes away from everyone into the mountains alone, and he prays.

Interesting how Jesus turned away from the people who came to him because of his power, and instead turns to God, the true source of power. But instead of staying in that refuge, Jesus leaves to go to those in need of his saving power.

For around 3 a.m., he sees the disciples in trouble. As is common on Lake Galilee, a storm springs up from nowhere. As the disciples are overwhelmed by the waves that threaten to

sink their boat, Jesus appears to them. We may think it strange that they mistake him for a ghost, but imagine how we would feel if we suddenly saw someone walking on the water as if it were dry ground. Jesus tries to assure them by saying, “Take heart; it is I. Don’t be afraid.”

And then, we hear from good ol’ Peter. There wasn’t much Jesus could count on in his life on earth, but he could almost always count on Peter blurting out whatever crossed his mind without stopping to count the cost.

Jesus hadn’t suggested anyone abandon ship. It is Peter who boldly yells out, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Only then does Jesus tell him to come, and Peter hops over the side of the boat.

I’m sure the disciples all gave Peter the raspberries when he hauled his sorry wet self back into the boat. But of the 12 disciples, Peter was the only one with enough faith to get out of the boat in the first place. He was, for a few moments, a water walker just like Jesus, the one in whom he had his faith.

But what happened? We’re told Peter saw the wind and the waves – which means Peter took his eyes off Jesus. And immediately, he begins to sink. After all, Peter’s name meant “Rock” – and rocks don’t float. They always sink to the bottom.

But as theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith.”

Peter didn’t sink because he was a habitual doubter. He sank because his faith was temporarily overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding him. But even with that lapse, he knew where salvation lies. He didn’t try to swim to the boat; he didn’t close his eyes and pretend that everything was OK.

No, Peter's faith helped him to immediately call out the name of Jesus, and Jesus grabbed him before he could sink below the waves.

God invites us today to fix our eyes and hearts upon Jesus, to know even in the midst of the worst storms of our lives, Jesus is able to bring save us. God encourages us to be like Peter, with a faith strong enough to get out of the boat and face our circumstances, so we too may be water walkers with our faith firmly in God's power to overcome all of our storms.

When unemployment rocks our boat, we can walk on water because God offers us the restorative power of Jesus.

When cancer rocks our boat, we can walk on water because God offers the healing power of Jesus.

When divorce rocks our boat, we can walk on water because God offers the loving power of Jesus.

Even when death rocks our boat, we can walk on water because God offers us the resurrection power of Jesus.

As we prepare this morning to receive communion, I would invite us to reflect on what storms have rocked our boats this week. And in receiving the bread and the juice, be reminded again that God may not overnight change our circumstances, but through His gifts of grace God offers peace and calm despite our circumstances.

Turn with me now to the Great Thanksgiving found in our hymnals on page 13.