

"A Flip of the Coin."

Gen: 37:1-4, 12-28; Ps. 105; Matt. 14:22-33

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At this point in Matthew's Gospel the picnic is over. The 5,000 have just been fed and they are on their way home. Jesus has sent the disciples home too, only they are going by boat.

Meanwhile, Jesus himself has gone off alone to pray.

The disciples get into a boat that is really a glorified canoe. The boats from this time that have been found along the Sea of Galilee are only about 15 feet long and a bit wider than the canoes we see on the rivers today.

All twelve of the disciples are piled in and they are making their way across the lake. Nightfall. They are still a long way from home and the wind is against them. Many of them are experienced fishermen who have spent their lives on the water. There's no thought of turning back. They battle the wind and the waves all night.

At about 3 in the morning they see the form of someone walking on the water. They are terrified. And who wouldn't be? In the time of the disciples the sea was the abode of demons. Its unruly nature embodied chaos in all its untamed fury.

But here is one walking across the surface of the water, one who we soon learn is Jesus himself. It is as if he has put all the chaos of life under his feet and he is in control. The One who is in charge of all things is there telling them to have no fear.

But the wind is still howling and the waves are still crashing. No

one can relax. There is still rowing to do. Peter, ever the brash, leap-before-you-look type, says to Jesus: "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

It seems like a strange request, really. Why didn't he just say, "If it is you, calm the wind and the waves like you did before when you said: 'Peace. Be Still.'" or "If it is you, come over here and get in the boat"?

Instead, Peter asks Jesus to command him to come to where Jesus is. Is he courageous or foolhardy? Is Peter just acting true to his brash, impetuous self? Are his words full of faith or full of doubt? Should we just flip a coin to decide?

His words sound remarkably similar to the words of someone else in scripture who said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Is Peter testing Jesus just like the devil had done earlier in his ministry? Or is he simply so anxious to be near Jesus that he is willing to do whatever it takes to draw near?

Does he want to be "like" Jesus - - able to walk on water and do the things that Jesus does too? Or does he simply want to be "with" Jesus, knowing that wherever Jesus is, that is the safest place to be -- never mind the speed of the wind or the size of the waves?

There are lots of possibilities and the truth may be somewhere in the middle. In fact, Peter's request may not be all that strange and we might even say that he represents all of us in his asking.

Who among us has never asked God to suspend the rules for us?

I'm sure at some point we've all asked God to intervene with a miraculous healing or to give us a sign so unmistakable as to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that God not only exists, but knows us by name.

Whether Peter wanted to be a hotdog disciple, or wanted to test Jesus or wanted to be like Jesus or just couldn't wait to be closer to him in spite of the danger, what we have is Peter asking and Jesus then commanding: "Come."

Peter steps out and starts toward Jesus. At this point in the story, the focus is all on Peter, but what about the others in the boat? Getting in and out of a canoe is tricky even when it is docked. Anyone who has paddled in rough water knows how dangerous it can be. Now add to that someone getting out of the boat in the middle of the lake. It's a tricky maneuver that's liable to land everyone in the drink.

In early Christianity the boat was the symbol for the church.

The implication was that the only safe place to be in a world of chaos and deep waters was the safety and security of the church.

Getting out of the boat was not just risky; it put one's soul in danger!

As Peter swung his leg over the side of the boat what were the other disciples thinking? "Look out! He's going to swamp us!" or were they wishing they had the guts to do what Peter was doing?

Or was it just, "There he goes again. That hotdog: who does he think he is?"

As they watch in silence, Peter takes his first steps and then he falters. No one got him into this mess but himself. No one - as far as we can tell - told him it was a bad idea. He even had the

commanding voice of Christ telling him to proceed. But he allowed himself to be overcome with the reality of where he was and what he was trying to do.

Panicked, he cries out: "Lord, save me!" And in that instant we know that if Peter had doubted who Jesus was, his doubts were answered. If he thought he was "hot stuff" he was all wet. In that instant he knows that he isn't God, in spite of whatever amazing things he might do then or in the future.

If he wanted to be near Jesus, Jesus was right there at his moment of greatest need. In that instant, Peter and the disciples know who Jesus is: He is the Lord and he is the one who saves.

There's no need for a flip of the coin, no "best 2 out of 3." Their questions are answered and their response is to fall down and worship the one who is Lord of Heaven and Earth, who commands the sea and the wind, who has put all things under his feet just like the waves.

As they get into the boat Jesus asks: "Why did you doubt?" This question covers much of this story and much of our lives. "Why did you doubt and think you had to put me to the test?" "Why did you doubt and lose sight of me?" "Why did you doubt?"

It's a question that remains unanswered and lingers in the air even as they worship Jesus as Lord. It's a question that challenges us whenever we wonder whether this whole "Christian thing" makes any sense at all, whether God even notices that we exist and why God doesn't do things the way we would like to see them done: bringing wars to an end, feeding all the hungry, curing all the diseased...

As the world around us continues to be a wind-swept, stormy sea, this is a question that will nag at us. Do we doubt God's presence? Are we afraid to step out in faith?

Some will say we should just stay in the boat if we want to be safe while others will say we have to get out of the boat if we want to stretch and grow in our faith. John Ortberg has written a book that the Wednesday night Bible Study worked with called "If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat."

Is this a call for us to move beyond our safety zones, move out of the comfort of the known and delve into uncharted territory and into unknown places? Or is it a call to refocus ourselves on the One who is the key to our safety and security, Jesus himself?

Our safety and security is neither inside or outside of the boat - it is in keeping our focus on the One who calls to us across troubled waters and who also meets us here.

We are always in a safe place when we focus upon the One who Sends us forth and gathers us in, who commands us to come to him and also commands us to feed his sheep, who sends us out into the world and who also has promised never to leave us or to forsake us.

Jesus is the One who is always within reach, always willing to save and always ready to pull us out of whatever deep waters we find ourselves in.

We will always have our doubts, but thanks be to God that Jesus' love for us and his power to save can overcome our doubts and bring us safely home. Amen.

A flip of the coin.

Today's Gospel story is a continuation from last week's. A continuation, that is, only in the sense that another miracle is involved and it follows directly after the text read last week.

After feeding the 5,000, Jesus sends the disciples off by boat and he goes up the mountain to pray. Picture it in your mind: This isn't a pontoon boat or anything like a boat we might take out on the open water.

Imagine a glorified canoe – wooden, about 20 feet long, maybe 5 or 6 feet wide in the mid point. Not exactly what you would call a stable boat. And yet, this is the kind of boat, dating back to the time of Jesus, that has been excavated along the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Imagine further a storm and no flashlight. There might be an occasional flash of lightning, but even experienced fishermen would be hard-pressed to get their bearings in the midst of the storm.

Nevertheless, they are able to make out the figure of Jesus coming across the water to them. NO surprise that they are terrified and imagine that he must be a ghost. No surprise, either, that Jesus' first words are designed to calm their fears and encourage their hearts.

If the story had simply ended here with Jesus coming alongside of them and stepping into the boat, there would have been plenty to talk about and a huge miracle to address.

Things take an interesting turn when Peter pipes up. The words he uses are dangerously close to those used by Satan out in the wilderness with the temptations. You may recall how Satan began each temptation: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

"If it is really you, command me to come to you on the water." Peter's request seems to have doubt written into it. Or does it? Is he doubtful that it is really Jesus or is he so certain that he is willing to do something crazy just to be where Jesus is?

Peter didn't ask the others whether they thought it was a good idea. No one else came up with the idea and no one else chimed in to say they'd like to come too.

In response to Peter's request Jesus simply says "Come." It's a word he has used to invite the weary and heavily burdened to "come unto him". It is the word he uses to call us into ministry in his name. "Come and be a part of my kingdom..."

Is it possible to begin to imagine all that went through Peter's mind as he asked the question, received the answer and then had to follow through with it? How about when his feet stayed above the waves? When he was several steps away from the boat?

The text doesn't tell us much except to say that he saw the wind and the waves, the reality of where he was and the earth-bound fact that he shouldn't be able to do what he was doing and that's when he started to sink.

It reminds me of the Walt Disney movie "Dumbo" and the baby elephant with the big ears flying around with his magic feather grasped in his trunk until he loses it and begins to fall.

Or maybe it is Wiley E. Coyote who has just dashed after the Roadrunner only to stop in mid-air. He doesn't fall until he realizes where he is.

Or maybe another image would be the young child first learning to walk who is doing just fine until others notice what she is doing and draw attention to it, and down she goes.

What caused Peter's descent? More to the point would be, what caused his success?

Was it doubt that made him ask the question in the first place? Or was it his faith? Was it doubt that caused him to falter? Was it faith that caused him to cry out to Jesus?

Faith and doubt are bound together in this story, just as they are bound up in our lives and in our hearts.

Recently we saw the new Batman movie "Dark Knight". In it there is a character, the District Attorney, who has a coin that he flips. We only learn later in the movie that it is a two-headed coin.

He makes his own luck.