

Proper 14  
August 13, 2017  
St. John's Cathedral

Some of you know that I grew up on the west side of the state on Puget Sound – a world that involves a lot of boats. Little rowboats that we had as children, speedy boats for water skiing, a massive shipyard in nearby Bremerton and the ferries that took us back and forth to Seattle. I loved that environment.

So I was excited at the prospect of a ferry ride between Marmaris, Turkey, and the Greek Island of Rhodes a few years ago. No big deal, I thought. Just another ferry ride.

That wasn't exactly the case.

As soon as we left the calm harbor, we hit the open sea with fairly large swells – and the ferry bounced in ways you just don't want a ferry to bounce. This definitely wasn't the Seattle ferry. About halfway through the trip they ran out of seasick bags.

A lot of people were worried about their safety. A woman sitting near me became hysterical and screamed something in a language I did not understand that was probably pretty close to what Peter cried out in today's gospel: "Lord, save me!"

What I didn't know at the time was that this was a pretty typical day on the Sea of Marmaris. Since it was early in the season, the ferry was probably a bit smaller than one we would have ridden in the summer.

I wasn't seasick, fortunately, but I really felt vulnerable. There was absolutely nothing I could do to change what was going on – no way out of this boat that bounced and rolled like a carnival ride. No way to control anything. It was the longest two hours of my life.

And I think that's kind of how the disciples might have felt as they bounced around in their boat on the Sea of Galilee in the story we heard in today's gospel from Matthew. To put it in context, Jesus had just fed a multitude of people with a few loaves and fishes in a stunning miracle of abundance. (We did not hear that gospel reading last week because it was the feast of the Transfiguration.) After that extraordinary picnic, Jesus wanted some alone time with God, so went up the mountain to pray. He sent the disciples off in their boat without him. And they found it rough sailing with high winds.

Today's gospel is memorable for many because it is about walking on water. Obviously in this story, the disciples felt some distress – certainly some vulnerability as they were bouncing around in their boat. And so, as Matthew narrates, Jesus came toward them early in the morning, walking on the water. It doesn't take away their fear, though, because they think he is a ghost. Then Jesus says the words they have been waiting for: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

In the ancient world, the sea was often symbolic of chaos or turmoil. A place that was not safe or secure. And often when the sea comes up in scripture you know that something is going on. Something is unsettled. Matthew may have offered this story to his church, undergoing persecution, as a story of encouragement and hope. Jesus comes to them and to us who are in a dangerous or unstable place, moving through the turmoil, the danger, the vulnerability we experience and bringing peace and assurance.

This image of walking on the water really has moved from scripture into a common, every-day secular context as an image for doing what seems to be impossible. Sometimes want to call a priest or find an employee, or a physician or maybe even a life

partner, who 'walks on water,' not as someone who actually does that, but as someone who is able to pull off what seems to others to be impossible. Someone who rises above the normal expectations of ordinary people.

Certainly walking on water has become a picture of Jesus that we carry around with us. The one who overcomes physical barriers to bring blessings to others. The miracles of Jesus feeding the multitude and later walking on water as he calms the storm pack a one-two punch of grace.

But one of the really fascinating parts of this story on the sea is Jesus' invitation to Peter to walk toward him on the water. Peter does this because he wants proof that it is really Jesus out there and not a ghost. Peter starts out pretty well, but freaks out a little when the wind comes up he loses confidence and sinks – and cries out to Jesus for help—which he receives.

There are two interesting things here. One is that Jesus seems to expect that ordinary people can walk on water—whatever that means. The other is that it seems to take a bit of faith and trust to pull this off. Peter was doing fine until he succumbed to his vulnerability and fear and sank.

Perhaps this is a pattern you and I have experienced. That is, if we are human. Sometimes it seems like we have the trust – the faith to walk on water. Sometimes we sink like a rock.

I very much like Richard Rohr's comment on faith. It is, he says, not so much about doctrines or ideas as it is about embracing the knowledge that Ultimate Reality (who we know as God or Jesus) is accessible to us and even on our side.

That, I think, is what we carry within us as strength for the journey. That's what speaks to our sense of vulnerability. "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

And there is plenty of vulnerability to go around these days. On the international scene we have images of ballistic missiles appearing on the news every day, reminding us of the possibility – the real threat of war. The rhetoric has been notched up. There's kind of a volatility that swirls around. And we wonder how to apprehend all of that. What do we do? How do we respond?

Of course vulnerability --whether it is ours or someone else's, comes in all shapes and sizes. It looks like unemployment, aging, injustice, ill health, poverty, isolation, abuse – a list that can go on and on. Sometimes we find ourselves in a place where we can't control what is happening around us. Maybe a place where we wish we could walk on water.

And sometimes we can. Often those are the times when we can cry out, "Lord, save us." Times when we are ready to step out, with God's help, and take a great risk to speak, or act, or offer assistance, or make a sacrifice. Times that grow out of our prayer life. Times when we can embrace those words of Jesus, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."

Some of the people who model this for us are the saints – both the every-day saints we know at home, at school, at work, at church. Our friends, neighbors, fellow pilgrims. Some of them are the ones who are more widely known and whose lives are celebrated by many.

One person who I think of as one who walked on water was Jonathan Daniels, whose martyrdom we celebrate this coming week. Remembering him seemed even more appropriate and important as I watched news coverage of white nationalist demonstrations this weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Daniels was a seminarian at what is now Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1960s after graduating from the Virginia Military Institute .

The stormy sea he found himself on was racial injustice and the emerging civil rights movement. His conviction, he said, was strengthened as he sang the Magnificat, the canticle at Evening Prayer every day in the seminary chapel: “He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath fed the hungry with good things.”

Daniels got permission to leave seminary and go to Selma, Alabama, sponsored by the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity. On August 14, 1965 in a small store in Haynesville, Alabama, Daniels saw a 16-year-old black girl, Ruby Sales, being confronted by a white man with a gun. He pulled her aside to shield her from the man’s threats and was killed by a blast from the man’s 12-gauge shotgun. Daniels was 26 years old.

In his journal he had written, “The faith with which I went to Selma has not changed: it has grown. ...with the black men and white men, with all life, in him whose Name is above all the names that the races and nations shout... We are indelibly and unspeakably one.”

Daniels’ found strength for the journey. He walked on water. He heard the voice of Jesus: Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.