

Matthew 14:22-33
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“Walking on Water”

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Søren Kierkegaard was a philosopher who lived in the 19th century. He was a Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic and religious author who is widely considered to be the first philosopher in the school of existentialism.

Later Existentialist philosophers reflect the foundation of Kierkegaard’s belief system which is... each individual is responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely, or as existentialists would say, we are each responsible to live life “Authentically.”

Kierkegaard wrote about faith in God using an academic approach. He believed most people wanted their religion to make sense and answer the questions of life. He thought this meant people of his day would require proof of God’s existence before they would come to faith. Yet, through extensive reading and writing Kierkegaard could not become satisfied by any of the existing proofs for God’s existence. He studied numerous authors who tried to prove God existed and Kierkegaard found there were always questions that remained unanswered.

After substantial study, Kierkegaard realized humankind could only reason and explain so much about God. And there would always be a chasm between proof and faith. Therefore, Kierkegaard concluded the journey of faith requires each person to make a decision. When faced with the remaining mysteries and questions... Each person ultimately had to leap over the chasm of doubts and questions and trust they would land safely on the other side. He coined this, “the leap of faith.”

We have an example of a group of religious leaders taking this leap of faith in the last couple of days. Many of you have heard of the racial tensions, unrest and fighting happening the past few days in Charlottesville, VA. It is a very scary scene near the University of Virginia campus. In the midst of Interfaith religious leaders organized a Prayer service Friday night as the hatred continued to be spewed nearby, and one of the pastors, Rev. Seth Wisperwey said, “We are asking our participants to wade into a scary and volatile situation because the people of God have to show up. We need to show that God is on the side of the marginal and oppressed who (*are often*) dehumanized.”

In our story from Matthew’s Gospel today it is Peter who is ready to take a leap. He sees Jesus walking on water, out through the stormy lake and though he cannot explain how Jesus could defy gravity, he is willing to take a risk knowing Jesus is nearby.

Now, we have established that this is a story about faith. But all too often I have heard people condemn Peter for a lack of faith. Christians suggest if Peter simply had enough faith he would not have sunk. While we know Peter was not always an “A” student in this class of disciples, to me this approach is misguided.

I think Faith becomes a part of this story in a completely different way. Think of it... Peter is courageous enough to step out of the boat... in a big storm... when fear has frozen everyone else. And Peter does this Why? Because he sees Jesus is near.

That makes this story a wonderful demonstration of faithfulness to God. In a moment when Peter recognizes he cannot save himself, he knew exactly where to turn: To Jesus.

In a day and age where we don't always prioritize academic reasoning the way society did back in Kierkegaard's day, Peter becomes an example to us. When sinking in the pressures of life, Peter shows us who to reach out to. When falling into waters of fear, Peter shows us who to turn to. When mired in muddy shores of worry, Peter shows us how to turn toward Jesus, who is closer than we even imagine.

While Kierkegaard would hear this story only for its focus on individual responsibility. There is another reason Matthew preserves this story in his Holy Gospel. Matthew offers this story to speak to what is happening in the young church in his community. The church of Matthew's day was facing hostility and persecutions. It was learning what it meant to live the life of faith in the presence of fear and storms, trusting God even when God seemed absent in their suffering. During very difficult days for the young church following Jesus' death and ascension, Matthew wants the people who follow Christ to know, even if Jesus is not physically with you, God is never far off and will offer a saving hand.

When I think of Christian Faith, an allegory comes to mind about two seeds planted side by side in fertile soil.

The first seed said, "I want to grow! I want to send my roots deep into the soil beneath me and thrust my sprouts through the earth's crust above me... I want to unfurl my tender buds like banners to announce the arrival of spring... I want to feel the warmth of the sun on my face and the blessing of the morning dew on my petals!" And so she grew.

The second seed said, "I am afraid. If I send my roots into the ground below, I don't know what I will encounter in the dark. If I push my way through the hard soil above me I may damage my delicate sprouts... what if I let my buds open and a snail tries to eat them? And if I open my blossoms, a person may pull me from the ground. No, it is much better for me to wait until it is completely safe." And so, she waited.

A yard hen, scratching around the early spring ground for food found the waiting seed, and promptly ate it."

We may never have done anything as impossible as walking on water. But we have stories of how we have lived by faith through times we couldn't have made it alone. Peter's encounter with Jesus teaches us how faith and courage are inextricably bound together and through his turning toward Christ as he was drowning, Peter encourages us to find new strength in each and every encounter with the living Christ.

So the next time the future looks impossible, or your predicament looks bleak, or our nation or our world look deeply bound by sin... when you become tempted to give up, give in, give out. Remember Peter, who didn't stay in the boat paralyzed, he stepped out, he moved toward Christ, and even when he began to sink, He knew Christ could lift him up.

Amen