

St. Peter: Save me from danger

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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The sun is shining, the sea is calm, there is a boat moored on the shore. Fishermen on the sea. All is peaceful. No sense of danger around but rather a sense of excitement mixed with peace.

Shortly after the Sermon on the Mount and the feeding of the 5,000 with the loaves and fishes, Jesus tells his 12 disciples to go ahead of him and to get into a boat and cross the sea to Capernaum without him. He waits for them to leave, most likely led by Peter and then he disperses the crowds and climbs a mountain to find a spot to rest and pray. Peter leads the others to the seaside, and they all climb into the boat and sail off to the other side, perhaps to talk and definitely to fish as they were accustomed to do.

Jesus has also just lost his dear friend John the Baptist and he needs time alone to pray. He also wanted to reflect and put into perspective what had just happened at the Sermon on the Mount. Did his disciples really get what had happened? Did they finally know what this journey was all about?

All is calm as Peter and the other disciples make their way across the lake. They knew the Sea of Galilee well; they were all experienced fishermen and all looked good weather wise. It was getting dark, but they were used to fishing at night and they knew the best spots. But they also knew that the sea was unpredictable, and would Jesus have led them into danger?

But then a few hours later during the night, between 3 and 6 in the morning, the wind picks up and the waves are battering the boat, and they fear that the boat will flounder. This is a much fiercer storm than they were used to. And it was pitch black and things were not looking good as they felt their boat tossing in the violent sea. But a miracle happens: Jesus is approaching them, walking on the water. But they do not recognize him as they believe a ghost has appeared on the water. A ghost of one of many people that had perished on this sea – were they to become ghosts? A sense of danger is upon them, and they start to panic.

As their fear turns to terror Jesus speaks to them. "Take courage, it is I – do not be afraid."

Peter then recognizes that the ghost is not a ghost. It is Jesus and he says: Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water. And Jesus simply says "come".

Well, we know that Peter could be a little headstrong at times so let's see what happens. He feels that his faith will keep him safe. He is recognizing that Jesus is truly the divine and Holy one. Peter decides that he will make a move and decides to throw off his outer cloak and leaves the boat to walk on water towards Jesus. He starts his journey step by step on the wavy stormy water. He is actually walking on water just like Jesus. But then the wind picks up and swirls around his legs and the waves become higher and stronger and reality sets in and he starts to sink. The danger bells go off in his head. He is scared, afraid to drown, to die, even though Jesus is close by.

He had believed he would be safe. After all he had just witnessed a miracle at the Sermon on the Mount and he knows that Jesus could perform miracles, but fear took over and he broke the lifeline that Jesus had extended to him. He lost his focus while the other 11 disciples were watching in horror at what Peter was doing. He was the

leader of the 12. What would they do now. Peter felt the danger lurking below his feet as he slowly sank. He most likely said, “Jesus, save me!”

Was he about to lose his life – can you imagine what the other disciples were feeling as the danger they sensed would have been paralyzing and they could do nothing? Were they praying? Did they sense another miracle coming?

But Jesus never intended any of them to drown and he extends a lifeline to Peter and reaches out and he takes his hand and safely pushes him into the boat. Jesus also climbs into the boat. Jesus calms the seas, and the danger has ceased, and then he rebukes Peter for his little faith – but Peter was safe and so were the others and Jesus was right there with them and then they knew. And Peter knew too, but did he still doubt? Jesus was the Son of God. Jesus was all powerful. He was the Divine, he was the Holy one. And this miracle was the one deemed to be the most important miracle that Jesus had done.

Jesus made God his first priority, even though he had a schedule that would boggle our minds, but he had an agenda, and his clarity came from God in prayer.

So why this miracle, why the sea, why walking on water – what significance did this body of water have in the days of Jesus – the lake was prominent in his life. He was baptized in the River Jordan that flows into sea of Galilee by John the Baptist. On the hill surrounding the sea he preached the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, and he taught the Lord’s prayer and performed the miracle of the fishes and the loaves to feed the 5,000. People were flocking to hear him. But did they believe?

The Sea of Galilee is beautiful and surrounded by fertile lands. It is the lowest freshwater lake in the world. 700 feet below sea level. It is the second lowest lake in the world with only the Red Sea being lower. It is 53 km in circumference, 21 km wide and 13 km long. Max depth is 48 metres. Due to its low-lying position, there can be brief but violent storms. It is fed by the River Jordan and has plenty of fish. It was in Jesus’ day a major part of the economy.

The Israelites were actually afraid of what lay beneath the surface – as far as they knew it contained frightening creatures. Jesus knew that the sea had a history of storms popping up and he needed the disciples to really believe that he was who he said he was – no doubt – he needed them to believe this.

He could have sensed the storm coming, he could have caused this violent storm to happen to give an example and fortify the fact that he was indeed who he said he was. That is why he used the term “It is I” – this name is the holy name the name of one who is divine. He needed his disciples to support his purpose on earth and thus one miracle after another was needed.

Jesus’s appearance is known as theophany – an appearance of one who is Divine, and the people who see the Divine in this way are always full of fear. Even though the Divine calms them down right away. Perhaps it was because they believed that if a human were to see the face of God then they would die. Another example was Moses and Burning Bush.

And if you are going into a dangerous situation, you don’t know what the outcome will be. Fear can take over. Your body triggers a fight-or-flight response. Your body releases hormones that slow or shut down functions not needed for survival. Your heart rate increases and your blood pressure increases. You look for a solution to this threat and

you can take a more dangerous route than necessary and not listen to reason unless you come to your senses.

Jesus brings Peter to his senses in a calm yet deliberate way and saves Peter. Why did Peter start to sink when he had actually walked on water. This is where the wandering heart comes into the picture. Now what does a wandering heart mean? I think we all have wandering hearts at times. It is a euphemism for faithlessness.

It was only after Peter was safe that Jesus rebuked him for his little faith – Peter had to know that was coming. Peter's faith was stronger than any of the others that remained in the boat. However, Jesus wanted to use this rebuke to help all his disciples see that consistent confidence in him was absolutely necessary. They then refer to Jesus as the Son of God and this is the first time that they do this. Wow – they got the message. Or did they? How many times would Jesus need to put them back on the path, especially Peter.

Life is full of distractions. I think of the saying “keep your eye on the ball.” This is almost like a mantra for my husband as he plays golf... I digress... How many times have you gone into a grocery store and left without the item you wanted because you either didn't make a list or forgot?

A simple example. But if you don't keep your eye on Jesus, the storms of life can quickly cause all kinds of problems. Following his wisdom, his teachings, his great love for all even when rebuking us. But also, not doing things that can get us into trouble and veer us from our course. When we are in danger, turn to Jesus.

We all experience storms in our lives when we are wondering if we can get through them without being tattered and torn. Medical issues, financial woes, unexpected repairs, being in a situation that you feel you can never get out of. It can be very difficult.

A true story. A few years ago, when Graham and I were first married, we were invited to spend a few days on Manitoulin Island with a family that we were very close to. We drove down on Saturday and stayed overnight and planned on going to church with them in the morning, but then for some reason decided to stay back and prepare lunch for them. We were sitting on the couch inside, enjoying the view, a cup of tea, and the peace and quiet, and fell asleep. But then we both awoke startled by a feeling that something was wrong. Perhaps it was the wind gusts that woke us, but we later felt was God. We headed outside and saw a mother and two young children in a boat that was heading out to the middle of the lake. The wind had picked up and they were obviously in danger as they did not seem to have any form of a motor and definitely no oars or paddles. They were not too far from shore but not heading to the shore and they could not steer the boat. We ran to the dock, and we tried to calm them.

Graham launched a canoe and brought them a paddle and told the mother to take the paddle and try as hard as she could to paddle back to the shore. It was too dangerous for him to try and get into the boat. The wind was very strong. It took at least 30 minutes of frantic paddling, but they eventually were able to get to the dock and they phoned a friend to drive them back to their cottage which was about a kilometre away. They were very grateful. We had prayed that they would safely make it back to the shore and we felt the presence of God there with us. We felt we were in the right place at the right time. There were no other neighbours close by and still wonder today what would have happened to them if we were not there. It was at the same time a scary but holy experience for us.

Jesus walks with us – he pulls us into his boat and gives us strength that we may not know we have. He never promised us smooth sailing, but he promised to be with us.

So, during these days of Lent, we need to pray more, do a study guide, meditate, give to a special cause, not take away something, be more reverent. We need to quiet our wandering hearts and steady our course. We need to feel the joy and rightfully so.

God has these special times for us – walk-on-water types of experiences that will bring us closer to each other and to Him. Amen.