

## Stepping Out on Faith

From my childhood, I have always been fascinated with this gospel. It has such an incredible combination of challenge, encouragement, testing and reassurance. Before I return to the story of Jesus calling to Peter, I'd like to tell you my own personal story of "fear on the water." My tale happened 18 summers ago, July 2002 and it has given me a whole new appreciation, empathy, and understanding of what Peter braved to do.

I had signed up to participate in the Lake to Forest Triathlon at Garfield Bay on Lake Pend d'Oreille, in N. Idaho. I had competed in this triathlon several times before & liked it. The swim had not been as long as some triathlons, it was only ½ mile, followed by a beautiful bike ride around a peninsula on the exquisite lake, followed by a "reasonable" 7-mile run through the woods. I had trained about the same amount as I usually did--enough to make it fun, not too much to hurt my knees! When I got there at 7 a.m., the morning on the lake was crisp and cool. The waters of Lake Pend d'Oreille are always cold, because it is such a big & deep lake. I had brought my wet suit which as I always did. I got marked up, so they know who you are when you go by the checkpoints and I proceeded to go down to the lake. The water was a bit choppy but that wasn't what surprised me. The sail boat which was the buoy that we swam around was way further out than usual. There is a cadre of fellow "slightly crazy" triathletes who think this kind of endurance is fun & so I knew several people from other events. "Susan," I said to my friend from the gym, "Isn't that sail boat out further than it was last year?" "Yes," she replied quizzically, "didn't you read the brochure when you signed up? It's a mile swim this year." My heart sank. I hadn't had the time to train as much that summer as I was finishing my seminary degree. I've swam a mile many times in my life--but not that summer & not in that cold water. For the first time ever, I thought I should just not compete that day! My friends talked me back saying, "Gail, Don't worry. You've swam a mile before--you can today." But I was not convinced. When I looked out at the lake, the boat seemed so far away. I began to get nervous. "What if I really can't do this?" Fortunately I didn't have too much time to contemplate my fate. The air gun went off several minutes later & the group started enmass. I began a steady swim out. The thought of it being a mile swim was heavy on my mind. About half way, I really wished it was time to turn around. My arms began to get heavy. I was cold. I began to breathe in shorter, shallower breaths, I was afraid & I honestly wondered if I was going to make it. What a way to go, I remember thinking, on some crazy test of athleticism. When I was about 200 yards from the boat, I decided I needed help! There were kayaks around & I hollered, "Over here. I need some help." A kayak was soon by my side but instead

of offering to help me get to another bigger boat, he handed me a life jacket. "This should help. You're almost to the boat & from there it is easy back to shore, because the waves will push you in." So, I began swimming with the help of the life jacket. It allowed me to calm down & get back to breathing normally. I gave the life jacket back & began swimming back to shore. I came back with a healthier respect for the water!

After Jesus sent his disciples back across the Sea of Galilee, he dispersed the crowds. Finally Jesus found a place of solitude on the mountain, where he spent the evening in prayer & stayed into the night. Meanwhile a storm had come up & the disciples were out in the middle of the lake battling the wind & the waves in the dark hours of the night. As they were struggling to stay afloat, one of them pointed out a figure barely visible through the spray of the water & the blackness of the sky. A ghost! Fear on top of fear! The disciples were frightened for their lives--the strong wind, the powerful waves and now a ghost. They cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately spoke to them: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!" Peter, in his relief at seeing Jesus & perhaps wanting to prove his faith, cried out, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus simply said, "Come." Peter stepped out of the boat & onto the crashing waves. He took some steps toward Jesus. Rather than belittle Peter for his *little* faith--I respect him for having the faith to leave the relative safety of the boat & walk toward his Master. But, like most of us in our faith, Peter began to doubt. Beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" As Jesus stretched out his hand to Peter, he said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Well, Peter doubted, I suspect, because he took his eyes off Jesus and began to look at the waves and the wind. In these lives of ours, yours and mine, there will sometimes be much to fill us with fear and with doubt - unless we can look past the immediate circumstance and keep our eyes on Jesus.

Peter remembered that the storm was violent & he began to doubt. But Jesus did not let him falter long in the sea. Jesus was Peter's life saver. He reached out his hand & pulled him up & out of the chaotic sea & carried him safely back into the boat. As soon as they got back into the boat, the wind ceased & the storm miraculously disappeared. That night, in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, disciples whose hearts were still pounding from fear, recognized the Son of God & acknowledged that he had saved them. Just as the sun was rising, they said, "Truly you are the Son of God."

What is it in your life that you fear? What keeps you from stepping out on faith? If you are like most of us you may find it easier to trust God when things are going well. Then it gets harder when the storms of our life begin to darken the sky. Let's take a look at what God would like us to learn from the little boat on the stormy sea.

Matthew tells us this story not only to tell us about Jesus and his followers. This is also a parable about the church & it is a parable about our lives. Matthew painted a picture of the church as a fragile boat being tossed around by the fierce wind & waves, signs of the trials the early church was enduring. Into this picture, Jesus entered, boldly walking on the dangerous waters. Jesus knew the danger, but he wanted to be with his disciples. Jesus was sent to accompany his loved ones through the storm & save them from their danger & fear. Jesus tells us, "**Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid!**" As disciples of Christ, living in a sinful world, we are always in the midst of winds we cannot withstand alone. We cannot meet the struggles of everyday life all by ourselves. We need our Savior to accompany us and help us through. This is where Jesus calls. He calls us to speak a message of hope. He calls us to bring a calming presence to those who feel thrown to & fro by the waves of life. **Jesus calls us to follow him.**

In his parable of the church, Matthew wants us to experience the storm. We can know, after hearing of Jesus walking on the water to the boat and Peter stepping out of the boat, that Jesus doesn't come to take away all of our hardships, our struggles, or our doubts. As long as we live on this earth we will encounter problems and, like his disciples, we are called to enter into the problems of others as well. We cannot save the world or even ourselves, but **we are met by the one who can and who does save us.** As you encounter the strong winds & waves in our personal struggles in life; as we all encounter the pandemic of Covid 19; as we all encounter the illnesses and yes, even death of the ones we love--we can listen for the voice of Jesus and know his words to be true. "take heart, it is I," Jesus said; "do not be afraid." Never forget it, my dear Christian friends, that all around may be uncertainty and darkness, that the sea may rage and be turbulent with fierce storms, winds that blow, but, ah! underneath there is the miracle of God's presence with us--supporting, upholding, sustaining. And across the winds that blow and the storms that rage, if we listen, we can hear his voice speaking still: "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid." And, across the winds that blow and the storms that rage, if we listen, we can hear him say, "Come ... come unto me." And, you know, my friend, if we but keep our eye on Jesus, we can and we will come to the "promised land."

As Jesus says, "Come to me all ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Amen.

