

“A Little Faith”

And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea (Matthew 14:25)

In today’s Gospel reading, Matthew provides a statement of setting that has always intrigued me. It shows up in verse 25 and occurs right after Jesus had fed the 5,000, and then forced the disciples into their boat as the sun began to set over the Sea of Galilee. As the Twelve sailed into the darkness, Matthew tells us that, “in the fourth watch of the night Jesus came to them, walking on the sea.” This phrase, “the fourth watch of the night”, refers to the Roman reckoning of the evening watch which divided the night into four, three-hour segments, putting the fourth watch between the hours of 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. And these are never hours you want to see. When we negotiated my curfew in high school, my dad used to tell me, “Nothing good happens after midnight...” and the older I get the more wisdom his simple proverb holds. The fourth watch of the night is awful. It’s a time when anxieties are high and the mind goes to perilous places, and last Sunday morning, I experienced the weight of the fourth watch like never before.

Unknown to us at the time, my dad was in the last hours of his earthly life. The day had been difficult and he was restless, so my brothers and I were taking turns watching over him while the other members of the family slept. My shift began at 2:00 a.m. and as I settled into the chair next to my father’s bed, the rain was striking the skylights above, and the shadows of sleeping grandchildren deepened the darkness around me, and I was overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness. And it was about this time that Matthew’s statement of setting entered my thoughts, “in the fourth watch of the night.”

“So, this is what Matthew meant?” I remember thinking to myself. And it dawned on me that Matthew’s words are so much more than a simple marker of time. “The fourth watch of the night” also conveys a sense of darkness and foreboding that all of us feel at one time or another. Taken from the title of a poem by St. John of the Cross, “the dark night of the soul” is a phrase often used to describe the paralyzing power of sin to steal our peace and sow seeds of doubt, and it’s a reality that is common to every single human being. Whether because of grief or illness, disappointment or despair, the devil and the world and our own sinful flesh seize on these moments of weakness and can leave us fighting to stay afloat.

We are called to “walk by faith and not by sight” (II Corinthians 5:7). And yet the things we see and hear and feel and touch can swamp us and leave us struggling to catch our breath. It takes great faith just to walk through daily life without ever trying to walk on water, and yet the hard truth is that most of the time we don’t feel like people of great faith. In fact, we work hard to keep our heads above water, waiting and wondering when the other shoe will drop. From this place of brokenness and fear we tell ourselves that if we could just believe a little more we could make the darkness, but we realize that we’re already believing as hard as we can.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus said to Peter, “you of little faith” (Matthew 14:31). And these words are of great importance for us disciples of little faith. You see, instead of telling Peter to buckle down and believe more, and instead of telling Peter he could do it if he would just work a little harder, Jesus made him walk on the water. And in this amazing miracle, He showed Peter exactly what God does with a little faith.

Of course, in the fourth night of the watch, as the disciples battled the wind and the waves, they would never have seen this. The only reason they were on the water is because Jesus had told them to get in the boat and go to the other side of the lake. And now, here they were, obeying orders, but instead of peace they were in peril. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had calmed a storm to protect them, but this time Jesus wasn't in the boat. How could these disciples possibly live and think and believe when Jesus was nowhere to be seen? This question is of paramount importance for us because, today, this is exactly where we find ourselves.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29), but these disciples weren't doing so well. They were already unnerved and exhausted, and when Jesus came to them walking on the water, they thought he was a ghost and they were terrified. But then Jesus spoke and they recognized Him in His word as He said to them, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (Matthew 14:27).

But Peter wanted to be sure. "Lord, if it's you," he said, "tell me to come to you on the water." (Matthew 14:28). Without hesitation Jesus invited Peter to join him on the rolling waves, and with his eyes on Jesus, Peter did it! He actually walked on the water! Yet as bold as Peter's request seems, it almost sounds like Peter was telling Jesus to prove Himself and provide some assurances before he'd step out of the boat. In other words, Peter wanted Jesus to deal with him on his own terms...and we do the very same thing. And yet God takes our veiled attempts to control a situation, and instead, He put us in a place where He can work on us...even during the fourth watch of the night.

Like us, Peter was a person of little faith, but the little faith of Peter was enough to receive this miracle, because, you see, the miracle was never about Peter's faith, instead, this miracle – like all miracles – was about Jesus. And whether we know it or not, His power is at work in us – even when the wind is howling, even when the waves are crashing. Even in the fourth watch of the night.

You see, all faith in Jesus is faith in the fact that He has saved us! Faith in Jesus – faith for his deliverance from drowning, faith that he'll be with us when we're sick, faith that He'll take care of our families, faith that when we die we'll be with the Lord – this saving faith is never generic or ambiguous. Saving faith is always faith in the promise that Jesus is God's Son, and that He's reconciled us to Father, that He's repaired our hopeless relationship with God, and restored our broken and helpless hearts, and that He did all of this by His death on the cross for us.

If the sin that separated us from God hadn't been removed by the cross of Christ Jesus, there would be no hand of God reaching out to us for anything. But in Christ Jesus, you are forgiven and you are right with God, and His saving hand is always there. It was for my dad last Sunday, and it is for you today. Peter may have only had a little faith, but he walked on the water. And even with a little faith, you will be amazed at where God leads you to walk...even in the fourth watch of the night. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. And all God's people said, "Amen."

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold