

Pentecost 9A
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Learning to Walk on Water

If you need something to bring a smile to your face, watch some YouTube videos of babies or toddlers learning to walk. They are adorable! Some of the little munchkins are in their jammies and some don't have on much more than their birthday suit. They vary in age, eye color, amount of hair, number of teeth, but the videos share universal similarities. There is always someone in front of them. They all first stand and pause, getting their bearing, deciding whether to take the first step. I would love to know what they're thinking at that moment! They all fall- right on their diaper protected bottoms. Some crawl away, but they all try again. Again and again until they get it. And who else is in the video? Someone cheering them on - probably a parent or two, or someone who loves them like a parent whose arms are stretched out, someone to catch them when they fall. Here's what you can hear in the background: Come on! Come to Mommy, come to Daddy! Yay! Good job! And when they fall it's, You're ok! Try again - you can do it! Radiant smiles from both babies and parents abound. Triumph is exhilarating. If you've ever seen a child learn to walk, these similarities will likely bring back treasured memories. Today's gospel reading reminds me of the experience of babies learning to walk and maybe you can see why, but I'll come back to it.

There are six accounts of storms on the water in the gospels and in each of them, Jesus is the one that calms the storm. What's unique to our story today is the walking on water event. We know the story well. You've probably heard comments like "She thinks she walks on water!" The Walking on Water miracle has prompted attempts by illusionists to mimic it, scientists to prove or disprove it, and even government agencies to replicate it. Did you know that the BBC reported in 1999 that the Israeli National Parks Authority authorized a private contractor to build a bridge positioned just below the surface of the water in the Sea of Galilee so that pilgrims in the Holy Land could have the experience of walking on water? To make the experience more realistic, there would be no handrails but there would be lifeguards in attendance. I'm pretty sure the bridge was never built - at least my internet research came up dry on that one.

All these attempts simply make a spectacle of walking on water. They are distractions that draw us away from the point (actually many points) of the story. Yes, there's no doubt that walking on water is a miracle. Only God can walk on water and the disciples would have known that from the Old Testament where Job says, speaking about God, "He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the Sea."

(Job 9:8) Walking on water is how the disciples came to realize that Jesus was truly the Son of God which is really important. But there's more. . .

Keep in mind that the disciples have already experienced a similar situation where Jesus calmed a violent storm that threatened their lives. Earlier in Matthew, there's the story where Jesus falls asleep in the middle of a storm but wakes in time to save them. They already knew that Jesus could save them. So why would they so afraid? Well, they were up against crashing waves and wind but Jesus wasn't with them this time. They were a mess - cold, wet, disoriented and beyond misery. Jesus knew they were in trouble and he went to them. Walking on the dark angry water he approached them and said, It's me, Jesus. "Don't be afraid". But they were - they couldn't help it. I wonder if Peter knew it was Jesus but he just needed to make sure, maybe more for the sake of his boat buddies than himself. Oddly, Peter told Jesus what to do and Jesus obliged putting the ball in Peter's court. "Come" Jesus said. Jesus had faith in Peter and for a moment, Peter had faith in Jesus, but when his fear returned, he started to sink. Peter cried out to his Lord and immediately, not a moment later, but immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. Jesus hinted that Peter could use a bigger dose of faith. Jesus and Peter walked back to the boat and when they got in, the wind died down. What a story! But there's more. . .

What about the onlookers? The other disciples who stayed back and clung to the rocking boat were riveted by what they saw. Not only did Jesus walk on the water, but so did Peter. Peter dared to step out of the boat to go to Jesus and sure enough, he walked! If they'd had smart phones it would have been posted on Facebook within seconds and Peter would have been tagged in the photo! Seriously though, can you see how Peter's faith and courage had an impact on the disciples? Do you remember what their response was? In awe, they worshiped Jesus, the Son of God!

We're really not that much different from Peter and the other disciples. We experience storms in our lives that make us afraid. The intensity of the storms vary and so does the fear that accompanies them. We fear the loss of loved ones. We fear losing jobs. We fear failing. We fear what we have no control over. We fear the unknown. Fear breeds anxiety, pain, misery, hopelessness and more. I think we've all had our share of personal turbulence and yet, we are here this morning. We've survived the storms.

Being afraid is an unavoidable part of being human - God knows that. As Christians, we can have faith that God will calm our storms and not let us drown, but in the middle of a tempest, it's not always easy have the courage and faith that Jesus wants us to. Even so, Jesus stays faithful to us. Jesus didn't walk away or scold Peter for his

lack of faith. I like to imagine that when Jesus pulled Peter up from the water, he patted him on the back and said, "Oh Peter, you know I love you. Have a little more faith, will ya?"

How we respond to fear becomes a witness to our faith and what God is doing in our lives. Think about the disciples' response to what they saw that morning. They were already Jesus' students, but when they recognized their teacher as the Son of God their lives were changed. The disciples saw two sides of Peter's human faith: faith so strong that he walked toward Jesus on the water, and a fragile faith that caused him to lose his footing. They also witnessed Jesus' perfect divine faith that called Peter out of the boat and that pulled him out of the water. If Peter's faith didn't waiver, Jesus would not have needed to save him and then how would the disciples have responded? Sometimes, we can be a more powerful witness to God's love and saving grace when we are honest about our fears and when our faith wavers. Then we can call out to God for help and God will answer. The gusty wind will become a gentle breeze.

During the gospel procession Bruce led us in a song: "Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest." Even though the words are so very true and real, sometimes we can't hear them. When fear overcomes us, it can be hard to accept Jesus invitation to come. Then what?

Remember when I said that today's Gospel reading reminds me of babies learning to walk? When I picture a baby taking first steps, an image comes to mind that reminds me of Jesus comforting words, that helps me let go of fears, that strengthens my faith - and I'd like to share it with you because I hope that some of you will also find comfort and strength in it.

Imagine that Peter is the toddler learning to take those first steps and that Jesus is the parent sitting in front of him. Peter is standing there in bare feet, trying hard to get his balance and Jesus is looking right at him saying, "Come to me Peter! Come on - you can do it!" Peter takes one step, stumbles and falls. Jesus lovingly reaches out and helps him stand back up, then he backs up and starts all over. "Hey Peter - here I am. Come to me! You can do it!. Peter takes two steps. "Good job Peter! You're doing great! Come on!" The bystanders are watching the miracle, riveted, impressed and awed. They're cheering too. Peter falls again and the cycle continues - again and again. Imagine what Jesus' face looks like when he's looking at Peter. Can you see his smile, his loving eyes, his joy? That is the face that Peter sees, it is the face that draws Peter closer and closer. It is the face that gives Peter confidence to keep trying. Jesus' expression doesn't change - because Jesus loves Peter no matter how many times he falls. Now imagine that you are Peter and that Jesus is in front of you with outstretched hands to grab hold of you if you fall. Jesus is looking at you tenderly with that same

smile, those same warm, loving eyes - it's a face that says, "Come to me. I am here and I will make sure that you're okay because I love you." Jesus knows when we're afraid and rejoices when we come to him with faith.

Jesus loves you infinitely more than a parent can love a child. This week, think about your fears and then imagine Jesus looking right into your eyes lovingly saying, "Don't be afraid." How will you respond?

Amen.