

“Stepping Out”
Matthew 14:22-33
Andrew Foster Connors
6th Sunday of Easter
Unraveled Preaching Series
May 17, 2020 during the Pandemic

There Peter is with his fellow disciples on the sea, their tiny boat tossed back and forth, tortured by the waves, the wind howling all around them – and Peter wants to get out of the boat. “Lord, if it’s you, command me to come to you on the water.”

This isn’t Jesus’ idea.

He never asked Peter to get out of the boat to prove his faith.

He never told Peter that if he wanted to follow him he had to walk on water.

Jesus asks some hard things of his disciples, but this is not one of them. This is all Peter’s idea. And it’s a *stupid* idea.

You do not get out of a boat in the middle of a storm.

You do not step out of the only thing that is keeping you from being lost in the raging sea.

You batten down the hatches, put on your life jackets, hunker down in the belly of the boat and pray that the waves don’t get any bigger and the winds don’t get any stronger.

You would think that any disciple whose name means “rock” would be just a little concerned about what might happen when he steps out of a boat. But *not Peter*.

“Lord, if it’s you, make me step out of the boat.”

Short of a death wish, I’m not sure what possessed Peter to make this request. Maybe Peter just had an overgrown ego. He seemed a bit eager to differentiate himself from the rest of the group, so keen to prove that he was more committed than the rest, so determined to demonstrate that he was the most turbo Christian of all the Christians that he would do anything to put himself to the test.

Or maybe Peter remembered his last trip on the sea with Jesus. It was the same sea and a similar storm. That time, Jesus had been asleep on the boat. The disciples were terrified. They had cried out “Lord, save us!” while they shook Jesus to wake him up from his nap. Maybe Peter remembered what happened that day – the way Jesus calmed the winds and the seas. Peter had been amazed, along with the rest of the disciples – amazed that even the wind and seas would obey Jesus. Maybe Peter remembered that day and was expecting similar kinds of miracles.

Or perhaps Peter just wanted to be wherever his Lord was standing. Whether he was standing on the firm ground of the shore, curled up in the bow of a boat, breaking bread with hungry crowds along a mountainside, or walking on the sea, maybe Peter just wanted to follow Jesus so completely, that even the impossibility of walking on the sea did not deter him. Maybe Peter trusted Jesus so instinctively, that even common sense did not dissuade him.

I don't know whether Peter was motivated by an egoistic desire to prove himself the most courageous of all disciples,
or by the memory of an earlier time when the power of Jesus overcame the impossible,
or by a deep need to stand wherever Jesus stood. I don't know which of these motivations led Peter to get out of the boat. But whatever the motivation, stepping out of the boat was a *stupid thing to do then, and it's a stupid thing for any follower of Jesus to do right now.*

Because this storm is real. Most of us have never encountered a storm like this in our lifetimes. Employment rate at nearly 15% predicted by some to reach as high as 25%. College students graduating to no jobs. Thousands of people in our city hungry save the food shipments that are being handed out each week. Health care workers already showing signs of mental fatigue and stress if not crisis.

Despite the rush to reopen, this virus is no less deadly than it was 2 months ago. And we don't have enough tests to test people who are sick. Hundreds of people were turned away from our siblings at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church on Friday. There aren't enough tests. There aren't enough contact tracers to track the people who are already sick. We are not ready to reopen.

All in the context of vacuum of national leadership that leaves the states without enough equipment to protect our health care workers, without enough tests to drive down our community transmission rates, leaving states like Maryland to open up prematurely under pressure from business interests and from some white Americans who have no shame arguing for their constitutional right to infect others, in the same week when a black man is denied his constitutional right to go jogging in his own neighborhood without being lynched.

With all of the waves threatening to break apart churches, threatening to breach the hulls of cities and nations, threatening to further fracture our world, it makes more sense to stay in whatever boat we find ourselves in. To batten down the hatches, put on our life jackets, hunker down in the belly of the boat and pray that the waves don't get any bigger and the winds don't get any stronger;

because the seas are rough, and the best way to avoid doing anything that puts ourselves at risk is to use common sense. *The safest way to avoid getting hurt is to stay in the boat.* That's kind of what we've been doing for the last several weeks, isn't it? I don't just mean literally - staying home to protect the lives of everyone - which is the most generous and loving thing most of us can and should do. I mean metaphorically. Staying in the boat hoping someone else is going to calm the seas, hoping someone else is going to take care of the storms, hoping someone else is going to make it safe for you and me so ordinary citizens don't have to step into this mess, to hold leaders accountable for our health and safety and to remind them that Baltimore City, at least, was sick before COVID-19 decided to pay us a visit. We already had underlying conditions.

It's not a good time to step out of the boat. There is no shame in staying in the boat. Jesus did not require Peter to step out. Jesus does not reprimand the 92% of disciples who stay in the boat. It's not even clear that Peter made the right decision. He stepped out of the boat, took a few steps on the water, came toward Jesus and began to

sink. Some say that all Peter gets for his efforts is a rebuke from Jesus, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” If he had just stayed in the boat he could have remained safe and free from danger, safe and free from Jesus’ wrath, like the rest of the disciples.

But I don’t think Jesus is *angry* with Peter. He’s *disappointed* in him. Jesus is disappointed in Peter because he knows Peter has what it takes to step out of that boat and stay afloat. He knows that if Peter were to stay focused on Jesus, he *could* walk around on the sea. He knows Peter’s history. He knows Peter better than Peter knows himself. I think Jesus was disappointed with Peter because of all people, Peter *could* walk out on that water with courage. Peter *could* stand in the middle of the raging sea and walk with Jesus.

Peter didn’t fail because he stepped out of the boat. He didn’t fail because he was willing to put himself at risk to be with his Lord. Peter started to sink because he noticed the wind. He noticed the wind and became frightened. And I can’t fault Peter for noticing the wind because the storm is real. The winds are fierce and the waves are lethal for every disciple that chooses to make the journey. And focusing on Jesus doesn’t do anything to calm the storm.

No amount of faith is going to end the unacceptable politicization of a pandemic, the refusal of some leaders to listen to basic science on this or on our other biggest world challenges.

No amount of trust is going to make it safe for our congregation to step into this storm with calls to put life before profit, or to point out even to some misguided clergy that religious freedom is not the same as reckless liberty, or to point out that the people who seem to be suffering the most in our community are the ones who were already sick before COVID-19 - sick with unemployment, or dilapidated housing, or inadequate, underfunded education, or at risk because their immigration status denies them basic unemployment benefits even though they pay the same taxes as everyone else.

No amount of prayer is guaranteed to calm those storms that sometimes rage within every life, within every home.

With the seas as rough as they are in the world today, I can’t fault Peter or anyone else for noticing the wind. I don’t know what waves are going to come crashing across the deck of this ship in the wake of this storm, huddled together trying to keep our little Tiffany-windowed boat on course. I can’t predict where the storms that we all must face will blow into your lives and send you ducking for cover.

But as I think about this moment in our history, and imagine forward to what stories will be told about you, about me, about us, I’m not interested in staying in the boat. I’m not interested in waiting to see if some political leader can save us on their own, that old fantasy that we trot out at every election - local or national - as if the history of our greatest triumphs wasn’t written in the blood of ordinary citizens who made the space for political leaders to do what was right. I’m not interested in ceding the public space only to business interests some of whom took more than what they needed and certainly deserved in our last financial crisis. I’m not waiting on some great medical institution, or small group of experts, or a few well placed philanthropists to come and calm the storms all by themselves. They can’t. Even the best of them can’t on their own.

And I can’t say I know exactly what to do in the storm anymore than any others of us who are finding our way through this moment. But I take a cue from Peter that one

step at a time is all that's asked for us. We know what the experts have told us about testing, for example - that if we want to prevent the kind of outbreaks that are likely to come, we need more tests so we can pinpoint new outbreaks, isolate affected people quickly and safely, driving down the community transmission rate. If we don't have enough tests in the city, then we should demand them from the state. If the state doesn't have enough, then our Governor should get all the other Governors that he leads to demand them from the federal government. That might just be the most supportive thing we could do for all of our frontline health workers, the medical experts who should have to defend their science, yes, but not truth itself, not all by themselves.

I don't know what waves would come our way if we actually stepped out a little more. I don't know what winds we'd have to face. But I know that *we have what it takes to step out of the boat*. I see it in so many of you. I know how willing many of you are to put yourselves at risk - in the places where God's children suffer and where we hope - to step out in the rough waters of this ministry, of this life, because you believe, against all common sense, that God makes a way. It's like some of us have been prepared for this moment for our entire lives. The public health officials called to speak honest prophecy even when it's not what kings want to hear. Those nurses in the COVID units getting by with one mask rationed for an entire week because our country wasn't prepared. Those principals and teachers and volunteers, heads of medical facilities who are doing what you've been called to do day in and day out even when it seems like you're going to sink. Ordinary citizens among us who are keeping neighbors fed, and attending to mental health crises of the ones you love, reweaving fabric that has been frayed in our city for so very long.

I know we have what it takes to step out of the boat. Many of us are already there. And you know, when you do start to sink, Jesus is there. To rescue you? Maybe. Or maybe just to remind you that you God has already given us what we need - not to know the future - we almost never get that kind of insight. Not to know how it all turns out - if we did, we wouldn't need faith. God has given you what you need to take the next step. Poco a poco as they say in Spanish - little by little.

And we walk together, or maybe especially when you walk by yourself, remember what Jesus says to terrified disciples when they misidentify Jesus in the middle of the storm. When they seem shocked to find that in the heart of their fear, Jesus is there. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Come!” It is the Gospel message distilled down to a phrase. Memorize it. Learn it. Repeat it. So that in this storm or the many to come you can Step out with the wind against you. Step out with the waves around you. Step out like you've done so many times before. Step out and feel the surge of courage in your veins. Step out and walk with your God, poco a poco, one step at a time.