

Walking On Water

What with back to back hurricanes coming through our neighborhood, not to mention the wildfires in the west coast and the earthquake that struck China last week, you have to wonder if the guys and gals that put together our readings each week are psychic!

After all, what's happening in scripture years ago, what with Elijah ducking fire and wind and storm, the apostles tossed like rag dolls on a rough sea, all of it is a mirror of what's happening today here in lovely downtown Palama and all around the world.

And you know and I know that there's plenty of folks who love to see God at work in the destructive forces of nature, sizing up hurricanes and earthquakes and wildfire as the judgment of God.

You will notice, of course, that the judgment of God that these folks so love to point out is always the judgment that falls on some other guy, never on the guy who is doing the judging himself!

The underlying assumption that God punishes by way of natural disasters is that suffering and death are the worst things, that suffering and death cannot lead to God, that suffering and death are to be avoided at all costs.

Which, of course, amounts to a complete rejection of what it means to be a Christian, what it means to follow this strange prophet from Galilee.

Bob Capon, an Episcopal priest, uses this analogy to the Christian life.

He says that most folks think of Christianity as something like folks swimming at the beach when the ocean suddenly gets rough.

The life guard, whose name is Jesus, starts yelling at everyone to get out so they can be safe.

Lots of folks listen and are safely ashore when suddenly a boy yells out that a little girl is still in the ocean, and she's in trouble.

The lifeguard races into the ocean, grabs the little girl, who (for the sake of some drama) has stopped breathing.

CPR is performed, and she survives.

Everyone is pleased, everyone thanks Jesus for his heroic rescue operation, and then, folks get back to their picnics and games.

Some will criticize the girl's parents for their inattention, others will comment on the rescue, while still others will chalk it up to an exciting day at the beach.

That, says Fr. Capon, is the common view of our faith.

People in trouble are rescued while the rest of us look on, we throw some judgment around and then chalk it all up to a good day when the rescue succeeds.

It's a view of Jesus as rescuer, who rescues a select few of us from an angry God or from God's angry sidekicks, like fire and earthquake and flood, and with the rescue, we get back to our lives as usual.

It's a view of our faith that says when disaster strikes, God must be mad.

But that's not Christianity.

Capon says Christianity is more like this story.

We still have Jesus the lifeguard warning everyone to get out of the rough surf.

We still have the boy hollering about the floundering girl.

But this time, when the lifeguard goes out to save the little girl, they both go under.

Both drown.

When the people go back to the lifeguard tower, they find a note from the lifeguard saying: "The little girl is safe in my death."

These past few weeks we have baptized new friends.

During each preparation class for baptism, I tell those seeking baptism that what we will be doing is drowning them until they are dead; and I try to make sure they know this before agreeing to the procedure.

Baptism is dying, and if you think I'm being melodramatic, listen to the Prayer Book:

"We thank you Father for the water of baptism. In it we are **buried with Christ in his death.**" BCP 306.

And again, "Grant O Lord that all who are baptized **into the death of Jesus Christ** your son may live in the power of his resurrection." Id.

Now, you don't get to resurrection without dying first.

And so baptism is our "yes" that we, like the little girl in Fr Capon's story, are safely dead with Christ until that marvelous day of resurrection that only God, in God's own time, will call forth.

And if we are already dead, then perhaps we need not fear the storms of life because the far stronger power of God has always and is always and will always overcome.

If we are already dead in Christ, then maybe our fears of people who are different from us, our schemes and plans and best thinking that keep us separated from one another, aloof from the smelly and the poor, well, maybe all of that can be set aside, put on the shelf, while we instead pay close attention to the people, places and things, in all their varieties, that God sends our way each and every day.

Peter seems to glimpse this truth as he ventures out on to the raging waters, and he actually walks along for awhile until his eyes deceive him with what **we call** reality and then he falters.

Forgetting he is already dead in Christ, he tries to save a life he no longer has, and in the process begins to sink.

So it might be with us.

The suffering and pain and misery of the world, naturally caused or concocted by human insanity, this is the door through which all who follow Jesus are invited to enter; because it seems that it is in these places where God chooses to make her home; there in the deep, way down in the depths.

It is a quiet voice that invites us in, as Elijah comes to see.

God is not in fire or quake or storm, but rather in that still small voice, the voice of sheer silence, it is there where we might find God.

Whether it is the quake in China a week ago or the Ebola virus killing hundreds in Africa or the Middle East that is remaking itself with horrific violence into who knows what; to the depths much closer to home: those depths in which our friends Kathy and Carl Crosier swim as they come to grips with Carl's late stage cancer, the homeless family rearing a week old child on the sidewalks of Kakaako, or the destruction caused by this weekend's storms; yes indeed, the depths surround us.

Sometimes we are rescued from the deep, as Peter is today.

Sometimes we are taken by the deep, as Jesus will be on the cross.

Yet even in the very teeth of the depths, there is Jesus, reminding us, as he reminds them: "I am."

While our translation has Jesus telling his friends: "Don't be afraid, it is I" the literal translation is "Don't be afraid, I am."

"I am" is the name of God, given to Moses at the burning bush.

And one thing more.

This story whispers that if we want to come face to face with Jesus, perhaps we need to climb out of the safety of the boat, and head straight away into the sea of other peoples lives, particularly the lives of those who are not like us; trusting that Jesus is there, just around the corner, leading the way.

As one pastor put it when talking about the declining church today: "the reason we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it."

Feasting on the Word, Year A, V. III, 335-6.

Or as Bishop Willimon says:

If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would not have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus.

I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing around in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith.

The story today implies that if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out onto the sea, you have to prove his promises by trusting his promises, through risk and adventure." Id at 336.

You see, that's why we are all here today.

We've learned these lessons.

We come here to remember the call to pass it on to a world that so desperately needs this good news: that death isn't the worst thing, that God tenderly cares for every last human being, that this world is meant to be a great and marvelous gift.

And so St Paul correctly asks:

"But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?

And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?

And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?

As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Rom. 10:14-15.

You have the beautiful feet!

You are charged with carrying this good news!

So take that step, **today**, into the storm, and discover, as you do, that "the word that saves you is right here, as near as the tongue in your mouth, as close as the heart in your chest." Rom 10:8.

+amen