

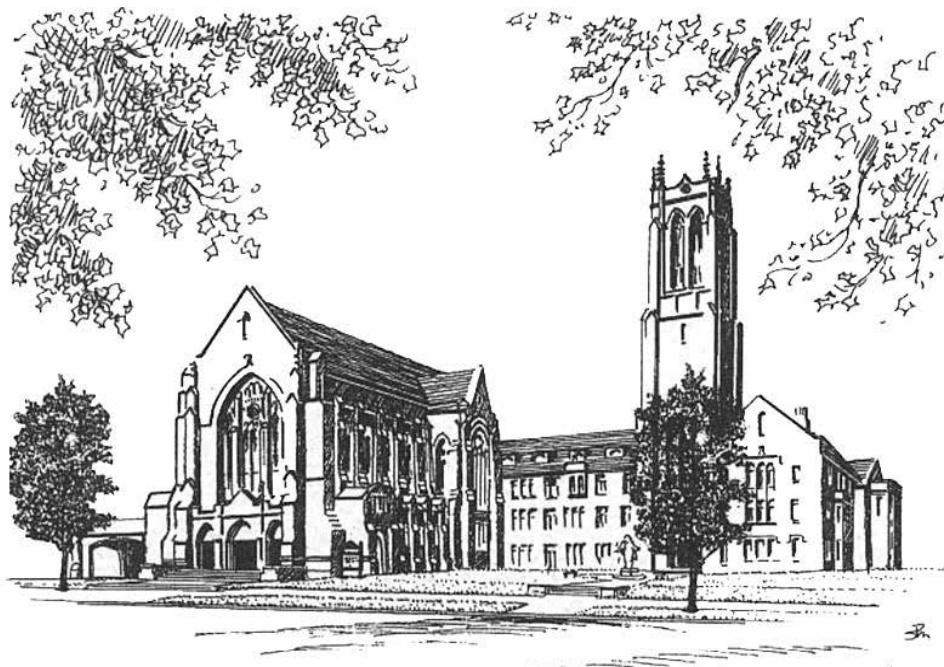
WALKING TOWARD US

by
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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; and Matthew 14:22-33

A life following Jesus is an adventure, as Peter discovered. I like Peter. He was willing to step out of a boat in the middle of a storm in the water just because he thinks it's Jesus in the distance. I guess when you follow Jesus you are never sure exactly what you are getting yourself into.

I didn't know exactly what I was getting myself into. I was new to this small town when I was sitting in the pastor's study one day at the church and got an odd request.

A woman from my church who I had just met called in a panic. She was on her way back home from Houston when she got word that her daughter had been riding her horse at their farm in this town and had fallen and broken her arm.

So I'm thinking she wants me to go and see her. But she's actually panicked because in the hurry of the daughter getting herself to the hospital, she forgot that the horse is still out at pasture with blanket and saddle on in 100+ degree weather. Now she wants me to go and get all of that off the horse so it doesn't overheat and die.

So I'm thinking I'm giving a pastoral visit to a human who has broken her arm, but I am actually giving a pastoral visit to a horse to save her life.

Off I go.

I arrive, and the horse is not far from the fence I have to climb over. I'm dressed in slacks and nice shirt for looking like a pastor and all.

I'm unsure what kind of mood the horse is going to be in and how receptive she will be.

Fortunately, I am able to unbuckle the saddle, slip it off, and then the blanket and get back over the fence safely and report back that the horse is fine.

This life of faith is an adventure. You never know what being a Christian is going to get you into.

If you've seen or read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, you will remember a famous line from it when little Lucy is learning about Aslan the lion, who is the Christ figure in the story, and asks Mrs. Beaver in the story, if Aslan the Lion is safe.

"Safe?" said Mrs. Beaver.

"Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe. He's not safe but he's good."

And so it is with a life following Jesus. It isn't always a safe life, as Peter and the disciples find out once again. But this Jesus is good, as we find out once again, too.

Gary Haugen is the CEO of International Justice Mission, an organization that does legal work and other kinds of work on behalf of victims of violence around the world.

Haugen wrote a book called *Just Courage: God's Great Expedition for the Restless Christian*. In it he offers a personal experience as an illustration of the lives of so many Christians.

He describes his reticence at going on an adventurous afternoon trek up Mount Rainier as a child with his dad and brothers.

"With... mounting anxieties beating in my little chest, I responded the only way a ten-year-old can to such a proposition and simply said: 'No. That looks boring.'"

Instead of choosing the uncertainty of adventure, he spent the hours they were going up and back on the mountain in the visitor's center. It was interesting, safe, and — after not too long — boring and dull:

"As the afternoon stretched on, however, the massive visitor's center started to feel awfully small. The warm air felt stuffy, and the stuffed wild animals started to seem just — dead. The inspiring loop videos about extraordinary people who climbed the mountain weren't as interesting the sixth and seventh times,

and they made me wish I could be one of those actually climbing the mountain instead of reading about it. I felt bored, sleepy and small—and I missed my dad. I was totally stuck. Totally safe — but totally stuck.”

Haugen likens this experience to the lives of many Western Christians, opting for safety over adventure.

“it is my sense that many Christians are starting to suspect that they are stuck at the visitor’s center. They suspect that they are travelling with Jesus but missing the adventure. Our call to the adventure of following Jesus will demand that we enter into terrain that makes us vulnerable and calls us beyond places our natural abilities, skills, and giftedness could take us.”

You’ve got to hand it to Peter. He and the others were in over their heads. The storm is raging, the wind is “against them,” an interesting and layered phrase.

They are in that boat struggling all night long when Jesus comes to them at day break.

Their presence in that boat on that water during the storm is so symbolic of the life of discipleship.

We sit in the hull of a ship dear friends. In this cathedral space, the place in which you worship is known as the nave, *navis* in Latin. It is where we get our term *navy*.

Cathedrals were historically built with this in mind, especially gothic or neo-gothic ones like this. They are symbolic because of stories like our Gospel reading today. The people of God are traveling together, always on the move, a people on an adventure, the best kind.

As none of us need reminding, that this life can be stormy. It can be disorienting. It can be unnerving, especially for those who follow Jesus of Nazareth.

We are people in a boat together in this life, and this symbol and this nave space remind us that ships are not meant to stay in the dock. The church at its essence, in its very name *ecclesia* in the Greek, are a people “called out.”

Why didn’t they recognize Jesus when he came?

We have these moments in the Gospels where Jesus isn’t recognized by those closest to him. Most of the time it is after the resurrection when he appears to the women at the tomb or those along the Emmaus road and they don’t recognize him until some significant moment.

Peter is ready to believe. He wants to walk to Jesus on the water, as Jesus is miraculously doing. But even then Peter says, “If it is you, Jesus, help me to walk on the water.” He’s still not sure.

We know that in the early Christian movement after Jesus’ ascension, there was great debate in the church about the nature of Jesus’ presence on earth.

And one of those debates was just what the Gospel names here — it’s a ghost.

In the mid 300s Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, a brilliant thinker of the early church, clarified how we think about Jesus over against

- a) those who taught that Jesus was a ghost who only seemed to be human — the Apparition Jesus (taught by the Docetists), and
- b) those who taught that Jesus was a human being who only seemed to have miraculous powers — the Magician Jesus (taught by the Ebionites).

Athanasius concluded that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. If he were not fully human he would not have the compassion to save us. If he were not fully divine he would not have the power to save us.

Jesus’ three-fold response to the disciples’ fear is, first, to “take heart.”

Second, he reveals his presence with, among, and for them. For while we translate what Jesus utters as “It is I,” the Greek is more sparse, succinct, and significant: “I Am.” I suspect that neither the disciples nor Matthew’s audience would mistake the pronouncement of the divine name that comes from the

Hebrew beginnings.

Third, having revealed his presence and identity, Jesus says those often-repeated words in the Gospels: “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid; not simply for all to be calm and peaceful again but calm so that our faith will grow and we will live what Brené Brown calls “whole-hearted” lives.

This leads us back to faith as adventure, faith as living courageously in the name of Christ. This is where we give kudos to Peter for his willingness to step out of the boat.

Brennan Manning in his work *The Ragamuffin Gospel* says that “the ragamuffin is the one who sees his life as a voyage of discovery and runs the risk of failure that has a better feel for faithfulness than the timid one who hides behind the law and never finds out who she is at all.”

Or, similarly, from another angle I love what Theodore Roosevelt famously said:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the one who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the one who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if she fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

In his inaugural sermon, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby encouraged the church to be like Peter and to get out of the safety of the boat.

"We are called to step out of the comfort of our own traditions and places, and go into the waves, reaching for the hand of Christ."

Archbishop Welby is in no doubt that what Christians need most today is courage: "the present challenges of environment and economy, of human development and global poverty, can only be faced with extraordinary courage."

And that courage, dear friends, comes from the One who walks toward us, who can calm the wind and the waves. The One who is the very Son of God.

The One walking toward you in the storm is the One who has the power to come to the place where you can't help yourself, where you are beyond all human help.

There is an African saying that we are always either going into a storm, in a storm, or coming out of a storm. And disciples are those who are learning to call on Jesus the Son of God in all three conditions:

When our boat is battered by waves, we call on Jesus.

When our boat is far from land, we can call on Jesus.

When our boat has the wind against it, we can call on Jesus.

Christ is approaching. Christ is present and able to offer assistance. And ultimately Jesus offers exactly what Peter needed.

Sure, he makes the point — why did you doubt, little one — but just as Thomas needed to see Jesus' hands and side piercings to believe, and just as Jesus taught him a lesson in faith — he still gave the disciples what they needed in that moment.

In this case, an outstretched hand, a love, as the hymn, goes that will not let us go. It is a hymn I learned long ago by the Scottish minister George Matheson:

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

You know, I don't see in the story that the disciples called out for him in the storm. I wonder if he just saw them in trouble and began to walk toward them.

That's what you do when you love; you would walk on water in a storm to get to them.

How much more must our God do the same?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.