

Lectionary 19A 2017, Matthew 14:22-33, August 13, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

No other miracle story in the Bible is quite so famous as the one we just heard, Jesus walking on the water. When someone says, “Oh, he practically walks on water,” we take it to mean there isn’t anything someone seems capable of doing.

There are, of course, two main characters in this story; Jesus and Peter. Peter often represents the rest of the disciples, acting out what really might be characteristic of all of them. But he is such a compelling figure that one can’t help but feel the gospel writers have captured the essence of the man. Peter is the first to acknowledge Jesus as the divine Son of God, and then, almost in the next breath, attempts to prevent Jesus from fulfilling his mission to the cross. When Jesus is arrested he is quick to draw his sword and defend Jesus, but then, just a few moments later, denies he even knows him. And here in this story, Peter is quick to jump out to the boat in the middle of the storm, because he believes Jesus word. And you know something, he was right. Jesus word could be trusted, he did walk on top of those waves, just as Jesus was doing. But then he saw those waves as a threat and he began to sink. Peter is like every other disciple in that boat, and he is like us. We experience moments of great insight and even strength of spirit. And yet we also experience moments of doubt and confusion and that sinking feeling as we are overwhelmed by circumstances surrounding us.

It’s when we are overwhelmed that we feel we are losing control. Maintaining control over our lives runs very deep in all of us. And when we feel things slipping away from us, and we are losing control over our lives we grow anxious and fearful. I believe we can see a metaphor for this in our gospel today. Peter sinks into the water as he is walking towards Jesus. For sinking is what many of us feel; sinking into a fear that nothing really matters, sinking into a fear that you try to live your life decently and then have a tragedy strike; sinking into a fear that your hard work won’t be rewarded with success or affirmation. And how do we respond to our fears? By trying to gain greater control over our lives and to legitimize it we make it religious, and call it faith.

The desire to be in control is precisely the opposite of biblical faith, even though they use the same words to describe their meaning. Peter stepped out of the boat onto the top of the water. He didn’t try to swim towards Jesus. He didn’t meet the waves on their own terms, he didn’t try to struggle against them. That would have been the attempt to control the waves. Peter neither attempted to control the storm, nor did he regard the storm as something which controlled him, at least for a little while. He did as Jesus himself, walking on the water.

True faith, the kind the bible speaks about is a particular kind of response to Jesus and his message about the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is ruled over by a king exactly the opposite of all earthly kings and governments. It doesn’t matter if this earthly king sits in a White House or a Pyongyang palace. Or if he is king of his own castle or she the queen of her own heart. Earthly rulers of any kind rule by attempting to keep everything under control. They keep at their disposal arsenals of weapons, threatening to deploy them when provoked. They build nest eggs to hedge against an uncertain future. These kings and queens lock the doors to their hearts and minds to keep at bay the threatening thoughts of being open to new ideas, new relationships that would open their future to something unknown, yet possibly beautiful. They fear the future and what they fear the most is often turned to hate.

I believe fear is at the heart of the hatred we saw on display at Charlottesville, Virginia on Friday and Saturday. The protests and the counter protests turned violent, and violence in order

to advance one's cause is always to be deplored. But events were prompted by a gathering of white supremacists which at its heart is based on fear of others who are not white and it's based on fear of losing control of the social privileges enjoyed for hundreds of years. This fear ends up being expressed as hate; hatred for the immigrant, hatred for the refugee, hatred for anyone whose race or culture or language or religion is different from one's own.

This is not the kingdom of God. First of all the kingdom of God is ruled by a king who gives up power and control, whose throne is a cross and who wears a crown made of thorns. We are made citizens of this kingdom by baptism where power and control and rule are turned upside down. In the kingdom perfect power is obtained not through the exercise of power but through giving it up. And what greater example of the relinquishing of power do we have than the divine Son of God, the Lord of all creation, being nailed to a cross. As Jesus stood before the powerful ruler Pontius Pilate, he said, "my kingship is not of this world, and if it were my servants would fight, but my kingship is not of this world." Earthly power, earthly control, attempted to rid the world of Jesus and what he stood for. That's what fear-based control will always try to do. Because it always fears love. It doesn't want a future open to God. It will always try to stifle love. And if it can't stifle love it will try to kill it.

But we must all live in this world of power and control, you might be saying. It doesn't seem very practical for we must all deal with the day to day pressures of business and illness and the uncertainties of the future. Should I not worry about these things? It's a legitimate question. One way of getting at this is by asking yourself, "what do you live for?" Do you live that you might provide a good home for your family, being a kind mother, loving father, faithful wife and husband, who works hard in order to provide for each other? That's good, and that's also God-pleasing. Or do you work hard that you may succeed, and have others admire you in order to prove yourself to the world? Do you want to control events before they control you? Trying to remain in control over all things is a futile task, for no matter how many plans we make for the future the world will never bend to our manipulations or desires. But bending the world, for those living in the kingdom is no longer the goal. We have something much better.

To us is declared a victory of one man over the need to be in control. Our lives will never be made complete through power, indeed they may even be diminished as we try to exercise power. Faith is how we respond to this message of God's upside down victory. As difficult decisions face us or unpredictable events happen we can rest assured that they will not defeat us, for we can believe in the one made perfect in weakness. And when that time arrives and it seems like even our faith itself falters and the wind seems too strong and the waves too high and we slip back into trying to stay in control there is that hand reaching out, like a welcome lifepreserver, catching us in love and forgiveness. Amen.