

Walking on Water

Jesus said, “‘Come.’ Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus.” Matthew 14:29

There once was a man who lived alone in a two story house by a river. After days of torrential rain, the river began to overflow. As the river rose, warnings were given via radio, TV and shortwave. Large jeeps drove through the area urging people to leave. A jeep approached the man's house and he was told: “You are in danger. You must evacuate immediately.” “No,” the man replied from his doorstep. “I have faith. I’ll be okay. God will take care of me.” The water rose higher.

Soon the man was forced to take refuge on the second floor. A boat going through the area arrived at his house. Rescuers again made every effort to convince him to leave. “You’re in danger. You will drown.” “No worries,” says the man from the second story window. “I have faith. I’ll be fine. God will take care of me.” And the floodwaters continued to rise.

Finally, the man had to climb onto the roof to avoid the rising water. A helicopter pilot saw him and hovered overhead. Using a megaphone, the pilot tried to convince the man to grab the rope ladder dangling over his head. “You must evacuate immediately. You will drown if you don’t grab the rope ladder. Let me help you.” “No worries.” says the man. “I’ll be fine. God will take care of me.”

The floodwaters soon covered the house and... the man drowned. Just beyond the pearly gates, the man encounters God: “I had faith, Lord. You let me die.” To which God replies: “I sent you a jeep, a boat and a helicopter. What more could I have done for you?”

That’s a classic story, an old chestnut, a favorite of preachers of all denominations. Why? Because it illustrates so well what happens over and over again in life. God’s trying to get

through to us, to help us deal with the inevitable storms of life, but some folks aren't paying attention, so miss out.

In today's gospel reading from **Matthew**, after feeding the 5000, Jesus sends his disciples ahead of him in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and he goes off alone to pray. Several hours later in the dark of night, the disciples, while fishing, encounter a violent storm. Heavy winds batter the boat. They're terrified. Jesus comes to them from a distance in, an admittedly, unconventional manner, *walking on the water*, but this only terrorizes them further as they imagine they're seeing a ghost. They fail to recognize him. Jesus tells them "*Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.*"

For most of the disciples, that's enough. Most of them trust that it is indeed Jesus, but, Peter, like the doubting Thomas after the Resurrection, needs convincing. "*Lord, if it's you,*" Peter says, "*command me to come to you on the water.*" So Jesus says "*Come.*" Peter actually takes a few steps on the surface; remembers he's in the middle of a raging storm on roiling waters; takes *his eyes off Jesus* (a crucial plot detail) and begins to sink. "*Lord, save me!*" Peter yells in panic. Jesus reaches out and pulls him from the water. When they get back into the boat, the winds die down, the sea becomes calm. The disciples acknowledge Jesus' divinity, saying, "*Truly you are the Son of God.*"

Like the man who refused to be rescued from the rising the floodwaters, the twelve, at first, don't recognize Jesus during the storm, despite the fact that they've been traveling with him for months and only hours earlier had witnessed the miracle of the feeding the five thousand. Apparently Jesus' chosen method of rescuing them, which, to be sure, defied the laws of nature, didn't meet their expectations, so, initially they're frightened at the sight of him instead of relieved. They almost miss out.

In the first reading from **I Kings**, the Prophet Elijah's long journey takes him to Mt. Horeb, which biblical scholars believe was another name for Mt. Sinai, the same place where God manifested himself to Moses centuries earlier. Similarly, Elijah experiences ... heavy winds, an earthquake and fire (the burning bush), the very same natural phenomena in which, Scripture tells us, Moses experienced God on that very site. But it's not in those dramatic events that Elijah experiences God, where, he, no doubt, expected to do so. Instead God communicates with him *unexpectedly* in "a tiny whispering sound" from the cave where he takes shelter.

Without openness to and awareness of this "unconventional" communication method, Elijah might not have received his twofold commission to anoint a new king of Israel and to appoint Elisha as his successor prophet. "God does, indeed, work in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform," as William Cowper, the English poet and hymn writer, wrote in the 18th century. And if we live our lives as if we don't believe God works in mysterious ways, we, no doubt, will miss out.

God "speaks" to us too in various and, to the spiritually uninitiated, seemingly unusual ways. Some concrete examples? In the quiet of our hearts when we pray or meditate; in Scripture or other inspirational reading; through the ordinary events of our lives like the birth of a baby; in the caring people we encounter; through history, nature, music, art, in short, through just about anything in creation. But, as in ordinary physical listening, if we're not paying attention, if we're distracted, perhaps by being preoccupied with ourselves, we won't hear what's being "said."

Ardis Whitman is a writer whose articles appear in magazines like Readers' Digest. In one of those articles she describes a moving episode from her own personal life. Her son had

died a few months earlier and she was having a hard time coping with his death. One night her college-aged granddaughter and granddaughter's boyfriend decided to try to bolster her spirits, so they invited her to go with them to a nightclub. To their delight, she accepted.

Everything went along fine. They were having a delightful time, until the band played an old favorite that reminded Ardis of her son. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she began to weep silently. At that moment the two young people did an incredibly beautiful thing. Spontaneously they both reached out and gathered the woman's hands into their own.

There the three of them sat – their hands intertwined. It was a beautiful healing experience for the grieving mother. She felt protected in a “circle of safety,” in a “place of love.” Commenting on the experience, Ardis wrote, “It is not surprising that heaven comes down to touch us when we find ourselves safe in the heart of another person.”

Then she recalled something that the Indian poet Tagore wrote to a friend who had visited him in a time of need. He wrote this: “After you had taken your leave, I found God's footprints on my floor.”

Scripture teaches that God is all powerful but needs us to continue His work of creation; to help Him build the kingdom here on earth. God, for example, can't make a peaceful world unless we root out hatred from our hearts, prejudice from our minds, and injustice from our societies. God can't create a happy family unless parents or other caregivers bring to it a spirit of sharing, mutual respect, commitment, forgiveness and unconditional love.

God heals the sick but not without the doctor's medicine, the surgeon's hands, the nurse's vigilance, and the encouragement of loved ones and friends. God assists the addict to recover

sobriety, but not without the trained counselor's skill, a twelve step program and support network.

God brings forth bread from the earth, but not without the farmer who prepares the soil, plants the seed, and harvests the crop. God helps the poor with the charity we give, cheers the lonely with the visits we make, comforts the bereaved with the words we speak, guides our children with the examples we set, and ennobles our lives with the acts of kindness we perform.

So when the inevitable storms of life occur... like illness, infirmity, death, failed relationships, troubled children, economic reverses etc....God is, indeed, there to calm the winds, to help us keep our heads above water. *But* we have to be aware that God often chooses to be there in the person of others. And if we fail to realize that and if we fail to do our part to help ourselves ... we will *surely* miss out.

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1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:22-33.

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time. August 7, 2011. (Cycle A)