

August 9, 2020 Sermon

Young people are good at questioning the Christian faith. It happens often at our dinner table. They want to know things like:

- *“Is God real?”*
- *Why are churches so messed up?*
- *Why are so many Christians hypocrites?*
- *Can I trust the Bible?*
- *Is it wrong to doubt God?*

When we deny the power of these questions – or worse, ignore them – others might suspect our faith isn’t strong enough to handle doubt. But we don’t have to have all the answers. Admitting that we *don’t* know everything there is to know about God is actually the first step in finding the depth of faith Jesus wants to develop in us. It’s the beginning of finding our identity in something that is greater than ourselves.

Today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel gives us an example of this kind of faith. Here’s the back story: Jesus has learned that Herod has executed John the Baptist. Jesus heads off into the hills alone to grieve for his cousin, but the crowds follow him. Jesus has compassion on them, and spends the day healing them.

As dinnertime approaches, his disciples urge him to send the people away to buy food, but Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." They tell him they have *nothing but* five loaves and two fish, so Jesus takes, breaks, and blesses what they have, turning it into a feast for thousands. Once everyone's hunger has been satisfied and the leftovers have been collected, Jesus returns to his original plan of spending some time alone.

Then the disciples head into their boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. But, the wind was against them. They were far from land, battered by the waves. No doubt, these disciples had experienced such weather before. Some of them had earned their living fishing these very waters. They knew how quickly a calm sea could become a tempest, as the wind swept down from the Valley of Doves onto the lake. It wasn't the water that was the problem. It was the wind.

How often do we find that the wind is against us? No matter how many times we experience this kind of sudden and strong opposition, it always seems to take us by surprise. We think we have things under control. We're enjoying a nice evening sail, and suddenly, it feels like we are fighting for our very lives as one thing after another batters us. It's often in the face of

strong opposition that our faith is tested. And what is the first thing we experience when this happens? Is it doubt? Usually, it's *fear*.

The disciples in the boat were terrified. Not only was the wind against them, and the waves were crashing, but there appeared to be a figure approaching them on the water that scared the living daylights out of them. "Stop being afraid," Jesus called to them. "It's just me – take heart!"

How often do our opinions and assumptions prevent us from seeing Christ for who he really is? How often do we cry out in fear when coming face to face with the one we should ultimately trust?

Peter's response was one of hope mixed with uncertainty. "If it's really you, tell me to come to you on the water." How often do we test God like that? "If it's really you, tell me what to do, Lord! If it's really you, make me do something I know I can't do on my own, something no one in their right mind would even attempt." Whenever we find ourselves saying, "If it's really you..." we are facing an identity crisis, but it isn't just our personal identity at stake – it's our understanding of *God's* identity. In other words, we're saying to God, "Prove to me that you are real. Prove to me that you are really God." So when Peter says, "if it's really you," Jesus calmly obliges. "Okay," he says, "come on then."

I've got to tell you, in that place, at that time, I would not have said what Peter did. I don't know about you, but given the position the disciples were in, and knowing that they had seen Jesus still a storm before this (Matt 8:23), I think my response would have been, "Lord, if it is you, get us out of this!" But not Peter. He was a true disciple. He wanted to do what his master did, say what his master said, **know** what his master knew. Peter wanted to walk where Jesus walked – even on the water.

So, Jesus calls Peter to him and Mr. Enthusiasm jumps out of the boat and starts walking in the Way of the Lord. Peter steps out of the boat, headed for the one he trusts. But what happened to him next? Like his name, *petros* (or rock) he started to sink. But then Peter notices the wind's strength, and his faith in Jesus melts away. "Lord, save me!" he cries out in fear And this is the ultimate example for us, I think.

We are all very much like Peter in our day-to-day lives. We want so much to be disciples – those who devote their lives to learning from Jesus and trying to live as Jesus lived. We want to have the great faith on which Jesus could establish the Church – we want to be the cornerstones that Jesus told Peter he was. But like Peter, when we lose our concentration, when we take our eye off the ball, even for a moment, we sink. Isn't that

true of you? I know it is of me. No matter how badly I want to be a great Christian, some stumbling block gets thrown into my way, and I'll look at it long enough to trip.

Fear is much more dangerous than doubt. Many of us fear a virus spreading into every corner of the world. While doctors and scientists rush to find a way to treat this disease, anxiety continues to rise. Meanwhile, protests against racial injustice have erupted into riots, and political shouting matches have devolved into violence. And what is fueling this violence? What is feeding this growing animosity between people? Fear. Each group sees other groups as a threat to health, safety, and peace. Each group is *afraid*.

But there is something even deeper than clashing ideologies at work in our society, something that continues to polarize and divide people. It is fear of giving up power and losing control. In our broken human state, we have somehow been conditioned to believe that controlling others, exercising power over each other, is the key to survival.

That kind of thinking leads to oppression, and oppression does not fit in with God's plan for us. Instead of exercising power *over* others, Jesus demonstrated "power under" – supporting one another in love. Which

brings us back to Peter and Jesus, out there in the dark on the water, with strong winds blowing against them.

“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus asks Peter. Jesus could be reminding Peter that it only takes faith the size of a mustard seed when he says ‘little faith.’ But when he asks, “why did you doubt,” he isn’t asking why Peter thought he couldn’t walk on water. He’s asking, “Why did you doubt *it would be me?*”

Think about it. Who else would be coming to this boat of disciples in the wee hours of the night, especially when they were struggling? Why assume that the figure in the distance was a ghost?

The word used here for “doubt” only appears in one other place in the New Testament. It’s after the resurrection, when the disciples meet Jesus in Galilee, just before Jesus gives the Great Commission. Matthew 28:17 says there they worshiped him, but some doubted. In both cases, doubt doesn’t refer to *unbelieving*, but *uncertainty*. It could also be translated as “wavered.” Wavering can be an act of deep faith. Here’s why:

When we waver, and admit our own uncertainty, we show humility. In our humility, we learn to depend on God alone, not our own certainty.

Instead of finding our identity in ourselves, we realize our identity is in Christ alone.

When we waver, asking hard questions of our faith, we admit that we aren't God. We become receptive to truth that is beyond our own understanding. How can a human being possibly walk on water? We can't explain it. We have to learn to trust in something, someone beyond ourselves, in order to grasp the unexplainable.

When we waver, when we doubt, we allow ourselves to hover in uncertainty, to embrace paradox, to dwell on mystery. This is where we grow. It's where we learn who we really are, and *whose* we really are.

A few years ago, my family moved to Ottawa in hopes of new careers, being closer to our family, and enjoying a better cost of living. But life took a horrible twist, court battles ensued related to custody arrangements and four months or so later we had to pack up everything and relocate BACK to the lower mainland, find work, and find housing. Might I add, it's VERY challenging to find housing when you don't have income. Those months while being alone in Ottawa with my daughter, while my partner was setting things up here, I felt so alone. I basically experienced a crisis of faith. I wasn't sure if God had forsaken me, had let me suffer like Job, and I was

pretty sure God didn't care about me any more. I hadn't renounced God, exactly. I just wasn't convinced that the suffering I was experiencing was the God I grew up believing and studying. Even after relocating back to Burnaby, I spent months questioning the God I so often had preached about to others. Then, when Aldergrove United embraced me into their arms, the love of God brought me to calming winds, and we made it safe to shore. It was in that moment that Jesus reached out to me, lifted me out of my fear, even while the strong winds of uncertainty blew hard against me, and helped me back into the boat.

Now I know that lots of people think this gospel story is about mustering up enough faith to take big risks. And others hear this story and think it's about staying connected to the church – because it's only when Jesus gets Peter back in the boat that the storm calms down and everyone is safe again.

But I think the lesson to be learned here goes back to the question Jesus asks Peter. Why did you doubt? I don't think it's rhetorical. I think Jesus really wants to know what causes us to waver. If we have faith to answer that question honestly, Christ promises to reach out to us and lift us up.

Peter may have been the only one who got out of the boat, but they were all afraid. The disciples may have stayed in the boat, but they struggled against the same strong opposing wind that Peter faced. Fear in the face of opposition, certainty in the face of mystery – these are the enemies of faith.

Here's the good news, though. When the wind is blowing its hardest, when the waves are crashing around you and your faith melts into fear, Jesus is there, reaching out to you, ready to catch you. When your doubt is overwhelming, Christ's peace is available to you. When you aren't sure who God is or who you are, Jesus says, "Take heart. It is I. Stop being afraid."

Then, just like those disciples kneeling in the boat, your identity will be clear to you, because Christ's identity will be clear. And like those disciples, you will be able to say to Jesus, "Truly, you are the Son of God." Amen.