

“...when [Peter] noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out...”

Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a rancher living on the edge of the badlands of Eastern Montana where, deep in the heart of winter, the only thing between him and the North Pole was a barb wire fence. And it was down.

One night, a storm howled across the prairie and blew down a box elder tree that had died some years earlier. The next morning, as the sky cleared, the rancher decided to cut the tree into firewood. He bundled up, strapped on his snowshoes, grabbed his axe and headed out.

On the way, he found a sparrow in the snow, overwhelmed by the storm and just barely alive. The rancher pulled his gloves off and began to massage the tiny bird until it began to stir. Then he put the little creature inside his coat and walked on toward the downed tree. As he walked, he began to realize that there was no way that he could cut wood with this fragile little bird in his coat. What to do?

Just then, he came across a cattle-trail and he saw that one of them had left a very fresh and sizeable deposit. So, he took the bird out of his coat pocket and stuck the tiny creature up to its neck in the steaming pile and walked on.

As the warmth of the rich organic fertilizer brought the tiny sparrow back to life, she realized where she was and she became upset and she began to cry out. Louder and louder she sang until just at the peak of her protest, a coyote crept up and ate her.

Now, there are three morals to this story: The first moral is this: when you find yourself neck deep in – can I say “dung” in the pulpit? – it’s not *always* an enemy who dropped you into it. Second, the one who pulls you out is not always who you expect. And third, when you are in the thick of it, use a little discernment in singing about it.

Now, what happened to Peter in our Gospel story ends a little differently.

Jesus has sent the disciples away and gone up the mountain, presumably to mourn for his cousin John the Baptist who had just been

murdered. John's death is on the disciples' mind as well when they see a shape in the dim light of the early morning that might be the ghost of their own teacher.

Has Jesus been murdered too? "Take heart," the ghost says, and then adding a line that reminds us of the burning bush, Jesus says "It is I." Still understandably a little tenuous, Peter calls out to Jesus: "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Now, I imagine in retrospect, Peter might have chosen something else to yell across the water. "If it is you, toss me a rope." Something a little more practical. Maybe, "Hey, great to see you! Grab an oar." Instead, he yells "command me to come to you on the water." Now, some say that if Peter had just had enough faith – if he had just tried a little harder – he would have come up out of the mess he was in.

But when Jesus says: "Come," Peter does exactly what he is told. When the wind catches Peter's attention, and he begins to sink, he cries out for his teacher who responds instantly.

Peter's experience is similar to the sparrow's in the snow, but not exactly the same. Let me give you three details that would have been more obvious to Matthew's first century Jewish community. First, the raging seas evoke the chaos before God's act of creation. Second, the wind moving across the water suggest God's creating spirit, which Jesus gives voice as he walks: "It is I." And third is the Greek verb that we hear in English as "doubt." "Why," we hear Jesus asking Peter, "why did you doubt?"

The more accurate rendering of the phrase is "Why did you stand in two ways?"

So, Peter, riding out a storm with a group of seasoned sailors, sees a ghostly vision of their teacher on the shore. When Peter calls out, he is looking for miraculous signs and wonders – the kind of supernatural spectacle that we expect when we say that Peter shouldn't have doubted.

With only for one kind of miracle in mind, Peter expects to walk on the water to his teacher. He imagines that he will walk *across* the chaos and never get wet. But it's the wind – God's spirit, not an enemy – that plunges him neck deep into the disorder. What Peter got right was to call to Christ. Immediately, his Savior is there holding his hand. A little better than a coyote, to be sure.

See, to follow Christ faithfully is not to avoid getting wet or messy. To follow Christ faithfully is to be up to our necks in the mess and chaos of life with the Risen Christ, the Word who near us, as Paul wrote, “on our lips and in our hearts.”

Now, I want to be very explicit here: I am not recommending that anyone stay in an abusive or life-threatening situation if they can get out. Christ *is* present even in those messes, but that’s NOT the kind of chaos that I’m talking about. I’m referring to the disorder that we walk into when we leave the sanctity of this church: where people of faith fear and harm each other; where children starve and die of preventable diseases; where we walk among lonely, forgotten and hurting people every day.

When Jesus took hold of Peter’s hand, the chaotic sea calmed and the wind subsided. Now, imagine Jesus speaking to Peter and to us saying “you of little faith...” not as a scolding or a reproach, but as a teaching moment.

Hear it as a reminder that, just like Peter, we do have a little faith – the faith of “these little ones,” Jesus’ affectionate term for the disciples who have repeatedly displayed their own wavering in the presence of God in Christ Jesus. What if Jesus is saying to Peter, “Look what just happened! You showed your little bit of faith and I was there with you. Now, why do you think you were you standing in two places?”

To pray for physics-defying wonders, like Peter, is to stand in one way. And we are encouraged to pray for miracles and I have seen things I can’t explain. But to “stand in two ways” is to also be aware of the deeper more profound reality already at work.

Christ has hold of us in the chaos. Always and already. That’s the second way.

So, what if Jesus is saying to you and me, “As you watch for the fireworks of supernatural miracles, are you also aware of the deeper, more amazing miracle of your daily, commonplace life? That I am always with you and that if you call on me in the chaos, I always respond?”

We little ones, we disciples, DO have little faith! And *it’s enough*. It’s enough so that we don’t have to be afraid when we are immersed in the world’s pain and difficulty. Our little faith is enough to remind us that Christ has laid hold of us so that God can continue calming the broken world through us.

Our little faith is enough for God to make us transmitters of heaven in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. We can seek justice *tempered* with mercy. We can promote truth and honesty *without* abandoning loyalty. We can serve with kindness, forgiveness and compassion right now *even as we wait* for God to bring the realm of heaven in fullness.

We can stand in two places!

Not to prove our faith, but because God needs us to be in the thick of life so that, as Henri Nouwen put it, our hearts “become the place where the tears of God and the tears of God’s children can merge and become tears of hope.”

So, when we gather at the table in a minute, and we take in the very presence of the Risen Christ together, remember who is holding you when you walk back into the wetness and chaos of your one, miraculous life. And the next time you are up to your neck in it, instead of yelling about it until you attract coyotes, remember the presence of the Risen Christ is always with you.

And pray something like this by the French mystic Elisabeth Leseur, who wrote: “The restless waves that sometimes beat against my soul are human things that come to it from outside; may others see in me only what is permanent and true; never may any soul hold back discouraged from mine because agitations and worldly complications have hidden the way of approach; may my soul be as smiling as my lips toward all, and may Thy Word, O my God, inspire my humble word and make it fruitful.”

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Works consulted:

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Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Love in a Fearful Land: A Guatemalan Story*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.