

Based on what you learn about Peter's risk assessment abilities in our gospel reading for today I'm quite sure you wouldn't turn to him for financial advice! But actually this desire to walk on the water is much more than just an impulsive spirit gone way too far.

Sometimes it is hard to connect how Bible passages fit with our lives today. Indeed some do not at all. Deuteronomy 22:8 says that when a new house is built a wall should be built around its roof. Why? Because they had flat roofs and people would walk on them. With no wall someone might fall off. Perhaps if it were written today it would say when you build a backyard deck you should put a railing around it.

But then of course many Bible passages do connect with life today, as does our gospel. We want to ask ourselves why was this put in the gospel in the first place. The gospel writers had loads of material about Jesus to pick from. Why did they pick what they did, because they had to leave most of it out? In today's case the disciples in the boat and Jesus walking on

water, and Peter trying to, were all strongly symbolic for Matthew's original readers.

It was a time of persecution in the church. Roman persecution hadn't developed yet but Jewish persecution was in full swing. And where was Jesus? He ascended into heaven and seemed to have left the early church to fend for itself. When would he return? How were they to survive their persecution? How would they find courage and strength and confidence to do his work?

Look at the story again. This follows on the heels of last week's gospel reading, the feeding of the 5000. Jesus immediately sends the disciples away to go to the other side of the lake while he dismisses the crowds. Then he heads up the mountain to pray. He prays by himself through the evening and into the night. All seems well until the scene shifts back to the disciples on the lake. They had made it far from land but then a wind came up against them. Waves battered the boat. And not just battered the boat. The Greek word is "βασανιζο" or "being tortured" by the waves. The scene is one of complete

chaos and fear. Most likely the boat will be smashed apart and all will drown.

Now see how this scene relates to the early church. Jesus is no longer with them, but has sent them off across a scary sea where they are being tortured and beaten. Chances of survival are looking slimmer by the moment. All is chaos and disorder. But Jesus has promised to always be with them. So where is he?

Perhaps our lives are not chaotic disorder, but we can certainly resonate with the question, "Where is Jesus?" The disciples knew they had left Jesus back there on the other shore of the Sea of Galilee. And we know that Jesus was somewhere back in history. We want some miraculous sign, or a clear experience, to bolster our faith. And these days the church is being similarly battered. Perhaps not in outright persecution like in our gospel writer Matthew's day, but in far more subtle ways. In the midst of our religious freedom churches are collapsing faster than they ever have in history. Western culture has decided the church is irrelevant, a leftover from the ignorant past. So all the more we want some proof of Jesus' real presence among us and in the world.

That night the disciples got the presence of Christ coming to them on that chaotic sea. And the church in Matthew's day as well as our day is reminded that Christ indeed is with us. Peter of course wants proof. When Jesus says, "Take heart, I am, do not be afraid." He says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

There is a subtle but real hint of something else going on here too. The Jews of that time were afraid of water. They were a land locked country. The only waterway they ever went on was this - the Sea of Galilee. They didn't trust the water, its murky depths were too full of the unknown. The sea had become a symbol of darkness, evil, and Satan. You'll remember that just before Jesus began his public ministry he spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. And what does Satan say to him with each temptation, "If you are the Son of God..." then do such and such. And what does *Peter* say to Jesus here, "If it is you..." then do such and such.

I think we are meant to see some parallels here. When we consider later on in chapter 15 Jesus will say to Peter, "Get

behind me Satan" we know that even a disciple can become the agent and voice of Satan. So what is really happening here? Well, unlike the tempting by Satan in the wilderness Jesus is not being tempted to do something outside of God's call. This is a case of putting God to the test based on a lack of faith. Peter wants proof on his own terms. He sets the standards, and what high standards they are: walking on water!

You gotta give him credit for guts, or perhaps roll your eyes at his stupidity, but when Jesus says, "Come" out Peter comes. Whenever I read this I so desperately want him to succeed, even though I know the end of the story. And it's a good thing he failed. For the learning from his failure is far more valuable than if he had succeeded.

If Peter had succeeded then we could come away with a very wrong headed notion of faith. If he had succeeded then we could say, "Look, if you have enough faith you can defy the laws of gravity. If you have enough faith you can be above the realities of aging and diseases and dying and accidents and all the bad stuff of this world that can be like a sea raging around us." But fortunately Peter failed. He didn't fail for a lack

of faith; as if faith were measurable, and if he had enough in him it would be like pumping him full of helium so he would float above the water. He failed because the nature of true faith is not to transcend the realities of this world.

True faith is to stay in the boat with the others. It is not to put God to the test. It is daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence, that God is with us in the boat, made real in the community of faith as it makes its way through the storm.

It's fine to ask God for proofs. And it's fine to ask God to suspend the rules of the world in order to help you through your life's problems. But don't expect God to be bound by your request. Remember, such requests are really taking on the voice of Satan. Having a relationship with God that is based on your terms is not going to take you anywhere.

Jesus will come to you fully and truly *in the boat*. He never promised to still all the storms. He never promised you wouldn't get wet from the spray. He never promised to suspend the laws of physics or the inevitability of biology. He has

promised to be with you and he did promise to love you. And he gave himself as promise for his love. He who could walk on water did not even spare himself the harshness of this world.

And finally he never meant you to go through the storm alone. Peter acted on his own when he stepped out. He left the community of disciples, and he started to sink. We are all in this together. We are in the same boat, whether it be smooth sailing or stormy seas. We thank God for his promises and the strength we receive from him. Amen