

"It's Me! Don't Be Afraid!"
Matthew 14:22-33
August 9, 2020
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Do you remember the tv show, "Monk?" It aired for eight seasons from 2002 to 2009. Adrian Monk, played exquisitely by Tony Shaloub, was a former San Francisco Homicide Detective who, although no longer on the force, worked as a consultant to the police department. There was hardly a case he couldn't solve. But the twist in this series was that Monk had severe Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which grew worse after the murder of his beloved wife, Trudy.

I recently finished watching all eight seasons, a total of 128 episodes. When the show first came out people laughed at Monk's extreme germaphobia, his aversion to shaking hands, and his constant use of antibacterial wipes- now he seems very sensible. Throughout the series we learn of all the things that Monk is afraid of - all three hundred and twelve of his phobias- including but not limited to: germs, needles, dentists, milk, death, snakes, lightning, mushrooms, heights, elevators, ladybugs, and coloring books.

Episode by episode we watch as Monk, with the help of his therapist and his friends, struggles to overcome his phobias enough to exist as a functioning human being. At times it was painful to watch. He was a brilliant man crippled by his plethora of phobias. There were times he had to face down his fears in order to help someone else- in one episode he had to climb a Ferris wheel to rescue his assistant. Eventually we saw him begin to thrive. With the help of the people who loved him he finally found peace in his life.

Fear was a prison for Adrian Monk. His phobias limited his life and his possibilities. By the end of the series he had not given up his fears, but he did learn how to live with them and not allow them to ruin his life.

Sometimes overcoming our fears can lead us into new life.

The command, "Do not be afraid!" is found sixty-eight times in the Bible- forty-seven times in the Old Testament and twenty-one in the New Testament. It is spoken by God and by Jesus to human beings. Almost every time God calls someone to do something it begins with "Do not be afraid." And right then you know there is probably a very good reason to be afraid.

Chapter fourteen of Matthew's Gospel finds Jesus and his disciples at the end of a very exhausting, heartbreaking, and powerful day. It began with the news that John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin, had been beheaded by the corrupt king Herod. When Jesus heard the horrifying news, he went off by himself to grieve but, like usual, the crowds found him. Before you know it there were thousands of people gathered around. And like usual, Jesus had compassion on them and healed those who were ill. As the day wore on the disciples realized they had thousands of hungry people on their hands with nothing to feed them. As we heard from Becky last week, Jesus told the disciples to feed them with a few meager rations- and to their great astonishment, they did!

After they gathered up all the leftovers- twelve baskets full- Jesus sent the disciples off in a boat to cross the sea. He then dismissed the crowd and went up the mountain to pray. By the time night fell a great storm blew up and the boat was battered by the wind and the waves. Early the next morning while it was still dark, the disciples saw something that terrified them. Someone or something was walking across the water toward them. Since they knew that people could not walk on water, their first thought was that this was not a person- maybe it was a ghost!

They cried out in fear and **immediately** Jesus said, "It's me! Don't be afraid!" Impetuous Peter called out, "If it's really you, Jesus, then call me to come out there on the water with you." And Jesus said simply, "Come."

So he did. Can you picture Peter, climbing out over the side of the boat, setting one foot down at a time, testing whether or not the water would hold his weight, knowing all the while that it shouldn't?

I wonder what the other disciples were doing at this point? Were they trying to hold him in the boat? Were they laughing at him for thinking he could walk on the water? Were they horrified that, once again, Peter was acting without thinking? And then, just like that, Peter was walking on the water toward Jesus. One step in front of the other, without falling into the sea. It was miraculous. Until it wasn't.

All the sudden Peter took a moment to think about what was happening. He saw the wind and the waves and remembered that he was just a human being. He took his eyes off of Jesus. That quickly he began to sink and he cried out, "Jesus! Save me!" And Jesus **immediately** reached out, grabbed him, and pulled him to safety.

As Jesus was reeling him in he said, "Oh Peter, you of little faith, why did you doubt?" As they climbed into the boat the storm stopped. The disciples fell to their knees right there in the boat and worshiped Jesus. For the first time in the Gospel of Matthew they confessed, "Truly you are the Son of God."

In those days, the people equated the wind and the sea with the forces of chaos, untamed and life-threatening. They were the symbols of uncontrollable evil. So not only were the disciples afraid of the natural power of wind and water, they feared the demons that might be unleashed by the storm. They were helpless in their boat and they were terrified.

Jesus had sent them off in the boat and when things got rough he came to them. In the Old Testament God is often shown taming the evil powers of the deep. And when Jesus calls out to the water-soaked disciples he uses the same language to identify himself as God did when speaking to Moses at the burning bush. "It is I," he said which translates to "I Am." "Don't be afraid. I Am is here" trampling over the waves, taming the sea, offering comfort and security. Jesus is identifying himself with God, the liberator and redeemer of Israel, the Creator of the world, the One who corralled the chaos. In that moment, the disciples have a clearer understanding of who this man Jesus really is. They see not only his humanity but also his divinity. "You really are the Son of God," they said as they worshiped him.

In the raging chaos of the sea Jesus brought comfort and security. Here we see Matthew's understanding of discipleship- obeying Jesus, sharing the fullness of his life and ministry, moving toward him confidently even in the teeth of the storm. Like all of us, Peter's faith is mixed with fear. His desire to be with Jesus is tempered by his human limitations. When Peter falls into the sea Jesus says, "O you of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

But even little faith isn't a hindrance to those who follow Jesus. Later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus promises, *"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains. Nothing will be impossible for you."*

Peter's mistake wasn't that he didn't believe in Jesus. His mistake was not believing in himself. His fear got in the way of his faith. The reality of his situation- the power of the wind and the waves- suddenly seemed to be larger than the power of the Son of God standing beside him.

Discipleship is always a mixture of faith and doubt. Peter's mistake wasn't that he stepped out of the boat. His mistake was remembering that he wasn't supposed to be able to walk on water. He didn't keep his eyes on Jesus. When he stopped relying on the world changing power of God and started relying on his own power- that's when he began to sink and Jesus had to rescue him.

The disciples participated in two boundary-breaking events of God that day- the feeding of the huge crowd and Peter's walk on the raging sea. The disciples were partners with

Jesus in his miraculous acts of healing, feeding, and forgiving. After his death and resurrection they were the ones who healed and fed and forgave people. God's liberating power was available to them through Jesus Christ.

I doubt that any of us have walked on water, but we, like Peter, are the faithful followers who sometimes become overwhelmed by the circumstances around us. We want to follow Jesus, we try to keep our eyes on him, but then the chaos of the world fills our vision and we lose sight of him. This is not the story of a weak and foolish disciple who can't get his act together. It is the story of a faithful disciple who wants more than anything to walk by Jesus' side- even on the water. But he begins to lose his nerve when the reality of his human limitations sets in. And what happens? Jesus saves him.

The most risky thing Peter ever did was to follow Jesus on day one. Getting out of that boat was just one more day in the life of a disciple. Jesus had already called Peter and the others to do things they never thought they could do. And here is what we sometimes forget. God in Christ doesn't lead us away from the struggles and the tensions in life. Jesus leads us right into the middle of them. But we don't go alone- we go with the power of the Risen Christ and we go together, as the community of faith, the body of Christ, the church.

Maybe like me, you feel as though you are living in the midst of a stormy sea right now. Our boat is wobbly and we aren't sure it can withstand the power of the water and the wind. But it can. I know it can because I know the One we follow. *"The key to faith and fullness of life in Christ is to follow Peter's example and be willing to step out of the comfort and security of the boat and head into the troubled waters of the world to proclaim the love, mercy, and justice of God that we find in Jesus Christ. Being a disciple is a risky and exciting business, but that is exactly what God calls us to do and to be. God assures us that if we get out of the boat we can count on the presence and saving power of Jesus Christ."* (Clifton Kirkpatrick)

Knowing the current turbulence in our world- racism, a pandemic, violence, corruption, the loss of voting rights- Christians have no business wading in the shallow water. We are called to step out of the boat, into the rising sea, and get into what the late Congressman John Lewis called, "Good Trouble." Getting out of the boat with Jesus is the most risky, most exciting, and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest.

"It's me! Don't be afraid!" Whatever the storm, whatever the uncertainties, whatever the fears, the church that is willing to risk a closer step toward Jesus has nothing to fear. With Jesus there is courage to engage every change, every uncertainty, every fear. Without him, we do not have much to offer the world. But with him, we have everything.

There will be days when we will wish we had just stayed in the boat. There will be days when our courage will weaken and our faith will wilt and those are the days when Jesus will reach out his hand and lift us up. Don't forget that God calls us to whole-hearted lives of courage and hope. What you do matters. What you say matters.

"Do not be afraid" is a hallmark of the Gospel. Fear has always been and always will be a reality for human beings. Being a Christian does not make us less afraid. It does not make us immune to fear. Bad things will happen in our lives. Our trust in Jesus is what helps us to define the fear we live with. He reminds us that God did not create us for death, but for life. Our God is the God of the past, the present, and the future. This God promises to be with us now and forever. God does not want us to live cowering in fear but to move forward in uncertain times with courage and confidence. Our relationship with Jesus Christ guides us in our response to fear.

Sisters and brothers, our world does not need more fear. It needs more water-soaked followers of Jesus who just have to get out of that boat.

(Video Clip- "Walk on the Water- Ted and Company Theaterworks.)