Jim's Sermon - August 13, 2023

There was a parish back east that had a new young priest, and they wanted to welcome him by having a picnic by a nearby lake. The young cleric was kicking a soccer ball around with a small group of boys from about 7 to 10 years of age, and at one point the biggest of the boys kicked the ball so hard that it went far out into the lake. After being initially impressed by how far the ball went, the boys started to moan and groan, especially the boy who owned the soccer ball. The young priest said, "Don't worry, I'll get it." To the amazement of all who were watching, he proceeded to walk out on top of the water to the bobbing ball. When he reached it, he kicked it as hard as he could but it landed in the water well shy of the shoreline. One of the boys turned to the other and said, "You'd have thought they could have found us a priest who was a better soccer player than this guy." Faith is sometimes about perspective. It's about how we see things, what we focus on, or don't focus on.

The story of Jesus walking on the water is one of the most famous stories in the Bible. Everyone knows the expression "That guy thinks he walks on water" even if they don't know exactly where the reference comes from. But this Gospel is not about arrogance or lack of it, it is about faith.

We understand faith to be a gift of God, and like most spiritual gifts it requires a response from us, it requires openness and nurturing. Faith is not poured into us like milk poured into a drinking glass. Faith is about relationship, and relationships are not one way. They take effort on the part of everyone involved.

Today's Gospel offers some guidance on how to increase our faith and as a result how better to share it with the world around us.

"When the disciples first saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!"

The first thing this story tells us about faith is that we must recognize it when it arrives. It doesn't always come to us in ways that we expect, and the nature of faith is that it often pulls us out of our ordinary way of seeing things. Just as the boys at the lake only saw the priest's pathetic soccer skills, and just as the disciples had a hard time seeing that it was their teacher walking on the water toward them, God's movement in our own lives is often easy to miss or misconstrue.

I think of the young woman who was rushing to a job interview. When she arrived at the building where the interview was to take place, she couldn't find parking. In a panic she prayed: "Oh God, if you will only find me a place to park, I will stop smoking and drinking and staying out all night carousing with my friends. I will even go to church on Sunday." Just at that moment a car pulled out right in front of her. She looked up to heaven and said, "Oh, never mind, I found one myself."

God's action in our lives is rarely dramatic. It is usually quite subtle, and it takes a certain spiritual sensitivity to recognize it. We need to be open to being surprised by God, to seeing God in unexpected places and in unexpected ways; coming to us on the on the stormy waters of our lives and of our world. And the more we recognize God's action in our lives, the stronger our faith and our ability to share it will become.

Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

The second lesson from this story is that Faith requires a response from us. It requires action. It can only grow when we do something with it. The divine is always available to us, always present. It is we who must move our hearts to access God's Grace. And we who must respond to the gift of faith by sharing it in service to others.

There is some confusion about this in Christianity. There are those who say that Paul's proclamation that we are saved by faith means that nothing we can do makes any difference, as if because God is all powerful and we are

infinitely small and vulnerable that our relationship with God is a one-way proposition.

"God saves, we just get saved" say many Christian preachers. But in his epistle St. James anticipates this faith vs works controversy and says quite clearly: What does it profit if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus, also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

We know that relationships in which only one person participates can't last very long. A relationship that is not nurtured by both parties will languish quickly and eventually fall apart. This is true, perhaps even truer, when it comes to our relationship with God. I believe that Paul's message is clear, we cannot save ourselves, it is God's grace that saves us, but we can, and must, be a participant in our salvation, in our developing relationship with the divine. We can and must act on our faith. And life is full of opportunities to do so. We only have to recognize them, to be open. You meet someone who is distressed, opportunity. You are asked to contribute to a worthy cause, opportunity. Someone you know is in hospital, opportunity. The young person you buy your coffee from seems like they are having a hard day, opportunity. A friend says, I think it's so weird that you go to church, opportunity. All day, every day. God provides. Paul says that in order to share the word of God we must be sent, I believe we have been sent and are being sent all the time.

When Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and began to sink.

Doubt is certainly a part of faith, but throughout the Gospel Jesus seems to call out those who do. He calls us to be courageous and stalwart and to

refuse to let doubt drag us down. Jesus was a good psychologist. He knew that our thoughts take us in a number of different directions, and that doubt will result in more doubt and faith in more faith; and that we have the mental ability to sustain an attitude of faith with the help of prayer and community. Sometimes, of course, we despair, and that despair can only be overcome when we decide to reach out a hand to Jesus, who is always there ready to give us a lift.

There are so many distractions I our lives, so much wind, and I think it is more often the case that we don't *lose* faith, but that we get distracted, and so we need to continue to remind ourselves and each other about what is most important.

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Another way to nurture faith is gratitude, and gratitude is a kind of recognition of God's presence in and among us. It is a recognition that what we need is already (always) right in front of us. Even within us.

There was a movie that came out a few years ago, called "Don't Look Up." It was the story of what happens when a giant meteor is heading toward the earth, and the various ways in which people respond. As the Earth's doom approaches, Leonardo DiCaprio's character, turns to his loved ones sitting around the dining table sharing one last meal, and says: "We really did have everything, didn't we?"

I loved that moment. We really do have everything, don't we? This is such a different way of looking at our lives; looking through the eyes of faith. And this attitude of gratitude and thanksgiving is a rich soil in which faith will grow very quickly and powerfully, just like plants grow in well composted earth.

Faith comes to us as a free gift, but it can lay dormant or it can grow, and that growth will be nurtured when we recognize God's presence, when we act on it, when we set our minds to the things of the spirit and live in hope, and when we are grateful. Living in this way is a miracle in itself, and if we can't walk upon the water, we will walk upon the earth with a compassion and trust that is miracle enough.