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The Long Arms of God

Surf the channels on any given night and you will likely find plenty of so-called reality shows whose sole purpose seems to be to tell all of us how absolutely unattractive, ordinary, and banal we are. They remind us that our houses are drab and our social life is utterly boring. The message is clear: we don't take enough risk. Or, at least that's what the "participants" seem to be saying as they mock our mundane lives with daredevil stunts, self-inflicted pain and brilliant business ideas. According to these superstars, we like to play it safe.

I guess that's why the story of Jesus and Peter walking on the water is a text often called upon when we need to be challenged to do great things, inspired to attempt what looks impossible, and be dared to plow ahead in the face of insurmountable odds.

A few years ago, John Ortberg wrote a book entitled *If you want to walk on water, Get out of the boat*. The book was very popular in some circles. The essence of the book is this: all we need is the boldness of Peter and enough focus not to be distracted by obstacles in our path and we too can live spectacular lives. In other words, there's a little Lance Armstrong in all of us and all you need is Jesus to bring it out.

All jokes aside, there is truth to the fact that we all have great potential as human beings. The Psalmist declares, "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor."

We are people who are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The Epistle of Romans tells us that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Surely we ought to be able to get out of the boat and walk on water.

Yet, today's gospel has another layer of meaning to it. Matthew tells us something else besides "be all you can be". This lesson here is not just another principle by which we can become more self-actualized. Though we long to emulate Peter's leap of faith, Matthew is, I believe, more interested in showing us the long and redemptive arms of God than Peter's momentary miracle. It's not that seeing Peter walk on water isn't impressive. It is indeed. It just wasn't necessary. His safety had already been guaranteed.

According to our text, Jesus emerges from a long night of prayer. The Gospel writers sometimes allow us to eavesdrop on Jesus' prayers, but not this time. The content of this prayer contained such intimate conversation between Father and Son that the transcript is not provided for our examination. Jesus prayed because he was wearied by the news of the execution of his cousin, John the Baptist. He prayed late into the night and into the darkness of the next morning. Not until 3am, the 4th watch of the night did he say Amen.

The whole time Jesus prayed, the disciples were in a boat trying to sail to the other side of the sea. There's just one problem. The boat is now in the middle of the sea being tossed around recklessly by the unruly waves of a violent storm. The clouds formed a jet-black canopy in the sky hiding the stars that normally guided sailors through the night. The disciples were terrified.

Surely they must have wondered, "How did we end up in such perilous conditions when we were only following Jesus' instruction?"

Have we not wondered the same thing? As soon as we begin to take a serious leap of faith, we are challenged on every side by stumbling blocks of all shapes and sizes.

As the disciples pondered their fate, there appeared in the distance a misty, shadowy figure. Fear dimmed their vision making it impossible for them to identify the silhouette coming toward them in the storm. Seeing no boat and knowing they were a considerable distance from the land they determined that it must be a ghost. As fear strangled their weak hope, a voice penetrated the darkness *"take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

They wanted to be rescued, but all they heard was this voice. This was their salvation. No parting of the heavens. No levitating the boat above the storm to safety. This was their salvation. Just a few words from someone they couldn't see saying, "It is I. Don't be afraid." This is their salvation. This is our salvation. The voice of one saying, "You no longer have to be afraid because I have come."

How many times have disease, death and disappointment caused us to doubt the presence of God in our own lives? We longed for the supernatural and all we got was a voice saying, "Do not be afraid." We desired some dramatic turn of events, but what we received was a still small voice saying, "Take courage. We prayed for a miracle and what we were given is someone saying, "It is I." God was there but we experienced little consolation because we felt powerless to do anything about our circumstances. What would have convinced us is that our loved one had not died, that we had not been disappointed or that our heart had not been broken. God was present, but we were not convinced. We're not alone.

Peter is not convinced either. So he does what any zealous leader would do. He doesn't wait for the ghost to come to him. He makes a pre-emptive move. He's going to go to the ghost. *"Lord, if it's you tell me to come to you on the water."*

Often these words are trumpeted as words of faith, but if we listen carefully Peter sounds a lot like Satan when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. *If you are the Son of God...* He even bears a striking resemblance to the unrepentant crowd at the foot of the cross, "come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God." Do something miraculous Jesus and then we will believe. Peter had less doubt about his own ability than he did the Lord's identity – *Lord, if it's you.*

Walk into the intensive care unit of any hospital and someone will certainly be praying a prayer like this – Lord, if it's you... Step into homes in every community and someone wearied by the strain of a troubled marriage or unmanageable teenager will certainly be praying, "Lord, if it's you..."

Peter's dilemma is that he cannot tell the difference between a ghost and God. Consequently, he does not recognize the voice that he hears. Because he doesn't recognize it, he doesn't trust it. Because he doesn't trust the voice, he is left to find his ultimate security in his own ability. If he can walk above the chaos and turbulence of the storm, then he'll be satisfied. The reassuring words, "it is I", are insufficient fuel for his faith. Often these words are insufficient fuel for our faith. We desperately want something more. The storms at work and in our families and in our nation can be overwhelming. And frankly, it would be nice to see a miracle. However, instead of having trust in the voice, we ask for power we can use as we see fit – the ultimate form of security. After all, if you have enough power you can be your own god.

Matthew says that Peter got down out of the boat walked on water. He came toward Jesus. When he saw the wind, he was afraid and started to sink. Peter traded trust in God for trust in himself and ended up all wet.

Peter is not alone. In an ongoing quest for dominance, nations have done what we once thought impossible. No one can accuse us of sitting in the boat like the other disciples. We've sent astronauts to the moon. We've split atoms. We've cloned sheep and dogs. We have just about walked on water. But I have news for you. We are sinking. As we speak, while people in most industrialized nations throw away food 3.5 million people in the African country of Niger are on the brink of starvation. We are sinking.

We spent decades moving toward racial equality and now political districts and school zones are being redesigned to create exclusive enclaves segregating race and class. We are sinking.

We have an administration who sends young people to fight a war against an enemy we cannot see calling their deaths heroic and, at the same time, blocks stem cell research because using frozen embryos to find cures for diseases would be a tragic loss of innocent life. We are sinking in paradoxes.

C. S. Lewis says "the Christian has a great advantage over other men; not by being less fallen than they, nor less doomed to live in a fallen world, but by knowing that he is a fallen man in a fallen world." It's all about perspective.

It is interesting that Peter didn't become certain about the identity of the Jesus until he was sinking. Perhaps it is not possible to see Jesus for who he really is until our perspective changes. As long as we trade in the self-righteous currency of hatred or greed or self-interest, Jesus looks a little ghost-like. But when we recognize our need to be rescued, we see him for who he really is – the Living Lord.

How many times in life have you cried out to God at your lowest moment only to be rescued by his majestic, merciful arms? How many times have you been pushed to the limits of what you thought you could bear only to be strengthened by the strong, sympathetic arms of Jesus? How many times have you been more afraid than you were willing to admit, only to be encouraged by the compassionate and courageous arms of Jesus? What a mighty God we serve!

Matthew says that Jesus and Peter got into the boat and the storm died down. The disciples worshipped Jesus saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." He is no ghost. He is the living Lord. And he reaches out with his long redemptive arms from one end of the world to the other to save the last, the lost and the least. Are you in trouble? Call upon his name. Is our nation sinking in a sea of conspicuous consumption? Let the church call upon his name.

He is the alpha and the Omega. He is the fairest of ten thousand and the rose of Sharon. As Paul reminds us in Romans, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

A verse from one of the church's great hymns says, "I was sinking deep in sin far from the peaceful shore, very deeply stained within sinking to rise no more.

Then the master of the sea heard my despairing cry, *from the waters lifted me now safe am I.*"

Amen.