

Gazing or Glancing at Jesus

Matthew 14:22-33

Proper 14-A, August 20, 2017

Our Gospel lesson today reminds us that there may certainly come times in our lives when we will go through some deep and stormy seasons of our own; the kind of deep and stormy seasons that apart from our faith in God could easily swallow us whole.

For a plant manager, his “deep and stormy season” may be his struggling to “make payroll” for all of his employees each Friday in a down economy!

For some parents—their deep and stormy season—may be their continued efforts to “parent” a rebellious teenager, whose only recourse in life—seems to be taking her tragically down a dangerous path of self-destruction.

For an elderly lady, her deep and stormy season may be her attempts to pay off some old hospital bills—that she feels very much obligated to pay, though her Social Security check is her only source of income and barely enough to provide her with the most basic needs in life.

For a married couple, their deep and stormy season may be their trying to put behind them a past infidelity as they seek to do their best to restore a proper sense of trust in the relationship between them once again!

My friends, our Gospel lesson today picks up at that a point where Gospel lesson (Matthew 14:13-21) ended last Sunday.

Jesus had spent the whole day preaching the Word of God to thousands of people, in addition to healing their sick! Then our Lord topped it all off by providing a nutritious meal for those thousands of people (Matthew 14:13-21); all the fish that they could possibly eat and all of the bread that they could possibly consume.

Why there was such a great abundance of food—that our Lord provided there that day—that Jesus 12 disciples ended up collecting 12 baskets—full of leftovers—when the meal was over!

After all of this activity, Jesus and his disciples were not only physically tired but also emotionally and spiritually drained too! St Matthew continues his saga by telling us: *“Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds” (v. 22)!*

Furthermore, St Matthew tells us in our Gospel lesson: *“And after Jesus had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came he was there alone” (v. 23)!* Jesus, no doubt, wanted to have some time alone to spend in communion with his Heavenly Father; but the New Testament also makes very plain to us that Jesus did not use these times simply to pray for himself.

But the picture of Jesus stationed on a hillside, praying, should not be totally separated from that frightening experience his disciple were having—on the stormy sea.

Here Matthew reminds us that in addition to the darkness of the hour, the sea was growing fiercely rough, as a strong wind was blowing (John 6:18).

The boat was being *“beaten by the waves,”* Matthew tells us here (v. 24). Besides this, Matthew also tells us, that the wind was coming at them from the opposite direction—so that all of their attempts at rowing the boat to the opposite shore, from which they had departed, were constantly being thwarted by nature! No wonder that these men were not making any appreciable headway!

But do you know what? Though these disciples could in no way see Jesus—apparently his eyes were still firmly fixed very much upon them! In this instance, Jesus was not only going to pray for his disciples, but he was going to go out to them—walking—on the rising and falling billows.

These disciples were soon to discover that Jesus could not only still the storm, but even use that storm as a pathway for coming to them!

Please let me point out to you that there is no other time or place in the Gospels where we witness Jesus doing this before—walking on the water! Most of the time, as far as we know, when Jesus crossed the lake, he took a boat ride just like everyone else! Initially Jesus coming to his disciples in this most unique and extraordinary way actually only intensified their sense of terror and only served to greatly heighten their fears! In their terrifying fears they cried out: “It’s a ghost!” and they become totally imperiled by their fear!

Have you ever had a day like theirs?

Eighteen hours of dealing with grabby crowds of people or on a day when you’ve necessarily become of enough sleep!

Or maybe your car broke down, or your flight home was cancelled for the second time on the same day!

In a real moment of honesty—if you were asked—you might admit that your being afraid has caused God to seem more to you like a ghost than like a Savior!

Or maybe that day came for you, when either you or your loved one received the worst possible diagnosis from the doctor.

Or your telephone rings in the middle of the night and you hear your son's voice, "Mom, Dad, I've been in an accident...."

Or someone maybe even has knocked at your door, or called you in the middle of the night, to tell you that your daughter or son has died?

Days like this will certainly eventually come upon most of us with very little warning and we, at those times, just like Jesus’ disciples here, will find ourselves consumed with fear. It may become dark and we will have no idea of what to do next.

How will we ever get through this?

For people, who by the grace of God, have been given a second birth into the kingdom of God—through the powerful washing away of sin in their lives by Holy Baptism and by their hearing the Gospel proclaimed—so that they end up totally embracing it—our Crucified and Risen Lord is still willing to come among us to speak words of peace and consolation to us and to our rankled nerves: *"Take heart, it is I; have no fear!"*

And yet the very next scene in our Gospel lesson this morning becomes just one more instance among many instances when that naturally impulsive man named Peter speaks up first!

It was dark. The wind was howling. The sea spray was more than likely stinging Peter's eyes. Nevertheless, once again, by the grace of God—the voice of Jesus was totally clear!

That's when Peter's heart leapt within him! And it must have been a powerful combination; a mixture of bravado and timidity that prompted Peter to blurt out loud: *"Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water"* (v. 28)! And Jesus said, "Come!"

While the rest of Jesus' other disciples sat there with a "white-knuckled" vise grip on the gunnels of the boat—within the BOUNDARIES OF THEIR OWN COMFORT ZONES—THEY WERE WILLING, AT LEAST, TO WATCH PETER MAKE HIS MOVE!

But someone has pointed out: Thank God for the Peter's among us! When life grows stormy, when we cannot see, when all is tired and wet and fearful and nobody knows what to do, usually God sends us a Peter!

These are those people who can think outside the box. Those who haven't been told it can't be done. Their middle name is "Adventure!" And they can come to us from the MOST UNLIKELY OF PLACES.

So, Peter stands up, puts a foot over the side, and steps out on the sea. His eyes are riveted upon Jesus. And he's doing it! He's walking on water! So, it was, the text says, *"He came to Jesus"* (v. 29)!

Indeed! There are times, I believe, when Christ does invite us to walk upon the water; to dare to step OUT in life beyond our own comfort zones TOO and to venture out into the realm of what would otherwise seem completely impossible FOR US TO ACCOMPLISH!

Unless we also have some of that impulsive audacity that Peter had residing within him—we will never be fully qualified to become the kind of leaders in our Savior's Church...that he still needs today!

So, Peter did the impossible. He walked on the water with Jesus. All was going well – going well – that is – until Peter looked down! Suddenly Peter's eyes became focused on the waves! Peter heard the wind howling out of the darkness and Peter began to sink. Screaming out loud to Jesus, however, Peter cries: *"Lord, save me!"* Jesus then reached out to a beleaguered Peter with his life-sustaining hand. -- I tell you, there is a powerful point being made here, one we should never forget. For as long as Peter *gazed* at God and only *glanced* at the danger, he was sustained. But when he *gazed* at the waves and only *glanced* at Jesus, he sank.

I titled the message this morning: "Gazing or Glancing at Jesus" because that are times, I believe, when those people, who are numbered among Jesus' most faithful followers can easily do some of both, especially when we remember that the word "gaze" means to look steadily and

intently; especially in admiration and astonishment. The verb “to gaze” means to look at someone or something in a steady way and, usually, for a long time. Many times, the verb “to gaze” can easily be interchanged with the verb “to stare.”

The word “glance” on the other hand signals the complete opposite meaning of the word “gaze.” To glance means to look briefly and hurriedly and quickly. In its noun form the word glance can easily be interchanged with the word “glimpse.”

Is it not also true for us? Jesus said there would come a day when *“men’s hearts would be weighed down with fear and foreboding of what is coming down upon the world”* (Luke 21:34)!

I have heard more than a few people tell me that in recent months and in recent years they have decided that they periodically must abstain from all of the news on television and printed in our newspapers and published in our magazines.

If watch too many news programs these day—they can certainly distract your eyes away from Jesus—and work to fill you with despair. So you and I may choose to abstain from watching them for a period of time, allowing the Holy Spirit to restore our faithful gaze at Jesus instead. If we didn’t do this, we could easily sink into the world’s miseries instead!

The answer to those times of despair and misery is to be very intentional in looking to God. Time spent in reading the Word, time spent in prayer and meditation, time spent with fellow believers ... all of these help us to keep our gaze where it ought to be. It is only when we look up to God that we see any difference -- the sustaining hope of all nations: The One who is able and the One who does sustain you and me!

When Jesus and Peter got back in the boat, the whole lot of Jesus’ disciples, Matthew tells us, worshipped him saying: *“Truly you are the Son of God,”* they whispered.

But this not the last time we would hear those words. The Centurion at the foot of the cross when he witnessed the highly unusual way that Christ died, still ministering to others--“Father forgive them, they know not what they do!” “Woman behold your son!” To John: “Son behold your mother!” To the thief on the cross: “Today you will be with me in paradise!”

As Jesus closed his eyes in death that Centurion said: “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

I hope that he later heard the good news of the Resurrection and was baptized and received into the community of believers who comprised that New Testament Church. For today we say: “Surely this man IS the Son of God!”

And so may it ever be with us as we only glance at the impossible world, but gaze at our Savior, Christ, the Lord of all possibilities! This is what the writer of Hebrews says too in Hebrews 12:1-2: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings to closely and run with endurance the race that is set before us—looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despised the shame and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God!”*

AMEN