

## That Sinking Feeling

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, August 10, 2008. RCL Readings: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45B; Romans 10:5-15; and Matthew 14:22-33.

Peter is more prominent in Matthew than in any other Gospel, and today Peter's faith is tested by suffering and doubt. Like several of Jesus' more striking acts of power, today's sea rescue (see Mt. 8:23-27 and Jn. 6:16-21), reflects the Old Testament understanding of God as the one who controls the power of the raging sea and the Leviathan and other sea monsters that lurk in the chaos of the deep. (Ps. 42:7-8; 65:7-8; 89:8-9; 107:23-32).

Jesus appears to the disciples with the words, "Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid." With typical bravado, Peter tests Jesus, saying, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Leaving the boat, Peter immediately sinks, only to cry out, "Save me!" This Jesus does, while rebuking him for his little faith, which triggers Peter's confession, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Peter is called by Christ but suffers from uncertainty and doubt throughout his life, fails to stay awake in the garden and denies Jesus during the Passion. Yet at every step he is rescued or strengthened by Jesus and is one of the disciples to whom the risen Christ appears. Far from being a symbol of certainty, constancy or fidelity, Peter is a symbol of a pilgrim church that often misunderstands Jesus, struggles with anxiety, fear and doubt, often with "little faith," and abandons Jesus in time of trial. Yet Jesus appears with the words "Fear not."

Most people do not like tests. And yet, much of life is filled with them. We are all familiar with standardized tests, PSATs, SATs, GSATs, LSATs, GREs—and on through the alphabet. A driver's license requires both a written test and a road test. There are multiple-choice tests, true or false, and essay tests. There are tests of strength, of wits, of will, of patience. Then there are blood tests, heart tests, brain tests, cholesterol and blood sugar tests.

And then there is everyone's favorite: the pop quiz. When I was in seminary we had a so-called "content quiz" every Friday from the readings assigned for the week. The questions were so obscure they drove us nuts. One of our favorites was "Name the six sons of Keturah." Who is Keturah we'd wonder. Anyone know? She was the second wife of Abraham. Who knew he had a second wife, let alone the names of sons she bore?

One evening I was out in the car with one of my brothers talking about the most recent quiz. One of the gems that day was "Who owned the threshing floor on which Solomon built the temple." And my brother said, "Okay, who?" With some exasperation I said his name was Aruna the Jebusite but he appears only once in all of scripture and I can't imagine that anyone would know this name except for a few students of the bible, and no sooner were the words out of my mouth than we passed a street sign and what did it say? Aruna. And in case I thought I imagined it, the next street was Bethel and the next was Hebron. Imagine! Many of you will have your own stories of being tested.

As the disciples, head off for the "other side." Jesus is praying. Later our text tells us that "other side" is a euphemism for "enemy territory." And then during the night the fishermen see Jesus walking on the water and become terrified – not just a little terrified but truly terrified. The same word is used to express Herod's fear at getting the news from the magi that a child was born to be king; the same fear that rendered Zechariah mute when an angel of the Lord appeared in the Temple; the same fear when they will later think once again it is a ghost appearing in the upper room after Jesus is crucified.

But it was not the storm that was testing the disciples, but what Jesus had to say that would be the test: "Take heart; do not be afraid; it is I."

"Take heart," were the words Moses spoke to the Israelites on the edge of the Red Sea with the pursuing Egyptians right behind them. "Take heart; do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today."

No generation is a stranger to fear. Before coming to power, Louis XII of France had been cast into prison and kept in chains. Later when he became king, he was urged to seek revenge but he refused. Instead, he prepared a scroll on which he listed all who had perpetrated crimes against him. Behind every man's name he placed a cross in red ink. When the guilty heard about this, they feared for their lives and fled.

The king explained, "The cross which I drew beside each name was not a sign of punishment, but a pledge of forgiveness extended for the sake of the crucified Savior, who upon his cross forgave his enemies and prayed for them."

The words "do not be afraid" run through the Gospel narratives spoken by angels to Joseph and Mary, by Jesus to Peter, James and John on the mount of the Transfiguration, by an angel to the women at the tomb, and by Jesus as he sends the disciples into the mission field.

To see Jesus walking across the water frightened the disciples, but the real test would be can they trust his word to them, "Take heart; have no fear; it is I"? Can they trust what he says? Everyone but Peter appears to be struck dumb but Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water!"

His words remind us of Satan testing Jesus in the wilderness, "If you are the son of God..." But, Jesus responds with one word: "Come." Peter now has no choice. He jumps out of the boat and walks toward Jesus. And Peter does quite well until he notices the wind, and fright takes over, he loses courage and begins to sink, and cries out, "Save me." Jesus reaches out and takes him by the hand.

The Emperor Franz Josef, who died in 1916, was the last of the great Hapsburg rulers. He lay in state in his magnificent palace in Vienna, surrounded by exquisite floral arrangements, sumptuous fabrics, jewels and gold. On the day of the funeral, his body was taken to the church in an

exquisite hearse drawn by magnificent matched horses. The pallbearers removed the casket from the hearse, and brought it to the locked doors of the church.

One of the emperor's attendants knocked loudly on the church door, and a voice came from within: "Who goes there?"

"His Majesty Franz Josef Emmanuel Hans, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Head of the Hapsburgs." Came the reply from within: "We do not know him."

A second time the emperor's attendant knocked loudly on the door, and a voice came from within: "Who goes there?"

"His Majesty Franz Josef Emmanuel Hans, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Head of the Hapsburgs." Came the reply from within: "We do not know him."

A third time the emperor's attendant knocked loudly on the door, and a voice came from within: "Who goes there?"

The answer this time was much softer and simpler: "It is Franz, a child of God."

Suddenly there was a loud noise as the massive bolts were drawn back, the doors were opened wide, and the interior of the magnificent church was made visible.

The doorkeeper then said, "The Lord welcomes Franz, a child of God. Him we know."

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—John D. Lane, "No partiality," January 11, 2004, *Trinity Church Web Site*,

Since this is my last opportunity, I want to say that I know it is a hardship when people leave and you have been through several leave-takings in recent times. The interim period is sometimes compared to the wilderness

wanderings of the Hebrews, and Moses is sometimes identified as the first interim minister. It is he who leads them through the wilderness, and he is granted the privilege of looking out onto the Promised Land. But he is not the one who will be sent to lead them there. That will fall to Joshua. So I hope you will hold on to the words of Jesus, "Take heart and have no fear." If you watch and listen you will recognize his presence and find him walking toward you.

You are never alone and you are never leaderless, rector or no rector.