

You have learned that the name “Peter” means “Rock.” You know what rocks naturally do: they sink in water. That’s what Peter did. He sank in the sea. Like a rock, he could do nothing to save himself.

It is Jesus who reaches out and grabs sinking Peter. Jesus pulls him out of the depths of despair, doubts, and death. Jesus places him back in the boat with the others. That is what Jesus does for each of us, too.

Actually, Peter is worse than a rock at the bottom of the sea. A rock does nothing. Peter does something – and it’s wrong. He becomes Satan. (He’ll do that again later in Matthew.) Satan tested Jesus in the wilderness by saying, “If you are the Son of God, then do something to prove it to me.” In our text, Peter says to Jesus, “If it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Prove to me that it is really you – and not a ghost.

In addition, Peter becomes like the first humans who wanted to be like God. Peter wants to walk on the water like Jesus. A few times in the Old Testament we read that God walked on water.¹ Jesus, the Son of God, does what only God could do. Peter wants to do it, too. Probably not a good decision. It would have been better if he were a silent as a rock.

If you think about it, and I have, if I were going to ask Jesus for a miracle, after spending all night in a boat in a storm at sea – apparently going nowhere; it wouldn’t be, “Command me to come to you on the water.” It would be more like, “Stop this stupid storm!” In addition, there’s no way that I would want to get out the some-what safety of the boat to be out on the raging sea. I’ve watched *Deadliest Catch* on TV. The last thing the fishermen want to do is be in the water during a storm. It’s safer in the boat.

While Jesus talks about Peter’s “little faith,” we can also conclude that it was a stupid faith. We might say that he had the intelligence of a rock. We know what rocks do in the water. They don’t float. (They don’t talk either.) Sometimes we are like Peter.

There might be another connection with the temptation story. One of Jesus’ answers to Satan is, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”² Jesus is partially quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. The whole verse says: “Do not put the LORD your God to the test, *as you tested him at Massah.*” Exodus 17:7 tells us about Massah: “He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘*Is the LORD among us or not?*’”

This is exactly what Peter does. Is it really Jesus with them in the storm or a ghost – something they just imagine? Jesus passes the test. Peter fails. Rocks don’t float.

Jesus tells Peter that he has little faith and doubts. We might think that if Peter had a strong faith he would have continued walking on the water. I don’t think that’s right. I think that if Peter had had a strong faith, he would have stayed in the boat with the others. He would have trusted that it was Jesus walking on the water. He would have been brave and not afraid in the midst of the storm, as Jesus told them to do.

Jesus gets Peter back in the boat with the other disciples. They all confess: “Truly you are the Son of God.” The others didn’t have to test Jesus to conclude that he is the Son of God.

¹ Job 9:8; Habakkuk 3:15; Psalms 77:19

² Matthew 4:7

Matthew is the only gospel writer who talks about Peter walking and sinking in the sea. Mark and John tells us about Jesus walking on the water, but they say nothing about Peter.

This can be seen as a story about the church. Later in Matthew, we will hear Jesus say: “You are Peter. On this rock I will build my church.”³ Peter is the rock – the rock who questions and doubts, who has a little faith and sinks in the sea, but who is saved by Jesus. He becomes the foundation of the church. So, if you have questions and doubts, a little faith, and overwhelmed by storms in your life, you are welcome here. Jesus saves you.

The story goes beyond that. The boat often symbolizes the church. The place where you are sitting is properly called, “the nave.” This comes from the Latin word, *navis*, for “boat.” “Navy” also comes from that word. The sea often represents chaos. One minute it can be calm and peaceful – we have the phrases: “Don’t rock the boat.” “Don’t make waves.” We like calm and peaceful. However, in the next moment, the sea becomes a storm that throws the boat off course or even seeks to destroy the boat. Chaos and difficulties also come to congregations – and we usually don’t like it.

Jesus had ordered his disciples to get into the boat and go to the other side. What’s on the other side? Gentiles. The land and people this side of the lake were Jewish. On the other side were Gentiles. In an earlier story, in chapter 8, the people on the other side are raising pigs. It is clear that they are not Jewish. Jews don’t eat pork.

It’s a bit like going west from here, across the sea, you’ll end up in Canada. They are a lot like us, but also a bit different.

The Greek word that is translated, “Gentiles,” is *ethnos*, from which we get “ethnic.” Often, it is used of people who are “not us.” Jews used it of people who were not Jews. Christians used the word to refer to the people who were “not believers.”

I think that every time a congregation makes a move to reach people who are not quite like us, from a different ethnic, or socio-economic category, there are storms in the congregation. It’s so much safer to keep the boat tied up at the dock – and go nowhere – and reach no one. That is not what God has called us to do and be.

Christ Lutheran is on a journey. We’re in a boat going somewhere. We don’t know where we will end up. We don’t know who the next pastor will be. There have been disagreements in the past. There will be disagreements in the future. There will be storms that rock the boat. Storms can happen within families. Even individuals can feel like they are like rocks overwhelmed by the sea of despair and doubts; or impending death. What we should not do is to doubt that Jesus is here with us in the midst of the difficulties and uncertainties. Jesus’ word to the disciples is also a word for us: “Take heart” or “be courageous” or “be confident,” the word can be translated different ways, “I am with you. Do not be afraid.” They witnessed the power of God in the midst of the storm, not in the calm waters. The storms aren’t the problem, it’s failing to trust Jesus. It’s failing to stay together in the boat. In my short time here, I’ve seen such trust and unity in Jesus among you, even when there have been differences of opinions.

It’s having such confidence in Jesus’ presence in the midst of difficulties that becomes the great faith we will hear about next week.

Last week we heard about the work the disciples had to do for the miraculous feeding to happen. This week we heard about the helplessness of Peter and the other disciples in the midst

³ Matthew 16:18

of the storm. He could do nothing to save himself, except trust Jesus.

Martin Luther, you've heard of him before, I'm sure, made a distinction between "things below," where we have some power to make decisions and do things – like disciples distributing food to thousands of people. We decide who we will marry, where we will work, how we can help others, where we go to worship.

There are also "things above," our salvation, divine forgiveness for our sins, our lives after death, our faith in Jesus, about which we are like rocks. We have no power to make decisions. There's nothing we can do to make it happen. We can only trust that Jesus grabs us and lifts us up and puts us in the safety of the boat with all the other rocks he has rescued. For that we give thanks.