

“Faith Vs. Magic”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

If the gospel writer had not identified Peter as the one who wanted to walk on the water, we probably could have figured it out, anyways. After all, Peter was always the impetuous one, the one to leap before he looked. True, he occasionally made a fool of himself, as he did on this occasion, but no one could ever doubt the depth of his commitment and love for Jesus. When it comes right down to it, Peter was a man of incredible faith. Of all those in the boat, as we heard in today's gospel reading, he was the only one who had enough confidence in his Lord to think that, simply at Jesus' say-so, a man could walk on water. That is faith!

Jesus said, “Come.” So, as the record has it, Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water, for a step or two anyway. Suddenly that big fisherman began to think about what he was doing, about the wind and waves that were lashing all around him, about the fact that men do not walk on water, and he began to go down like a rook. “Lord, save me!”

Jesus responded, of course. He rescued the sinking sailor, gently chided him for his “little faith” and brought him back to the boat. Great old story. Of course, we have heard it since our earliest days in Sunday School, so perhaps it has become routine in the telling. We even joke about it.

There is one that has gone around for years about three ministers out fishing together in small boat. One of them, suddenly realizing that he had left his toolbox in the cabin, stepped out of the boat, and walked on the water over to the shore. Just then, the second one said he had forgotten his faithful fishing hat on the front seat of the car. He, too, stepped out of the boat and walked on the water over to the shore. When they had both returned, the third minister who had watched this remarkable demonstration with mouth open and eyes wide, reasoned to himself, “My faith is as strong as theirs, I can do that, too.” So he stepped out of the boat and promptly sank to the bottom. His two companions dragged him out, but once they got him in the boat, he was determined not to be shown up. He stepped once more, and immediately sank again. As his friends, pulled him out, he sputtered, “My faith is as strong as yours. Why can't I walk on the water?”

The first two looked at each other and one finally said, “We'd better tell him where those rocks are before he drowns himself.”

To be sure, the Bible story was never intended as a joke. We did not learn it that way and don't think of it that way now. We hear how great Jesus is to be able to perform such a miracle as water walking. We hear how foolish Peter was to take his eyes off Jesus, to waver in his faith. Then we challenge ourselves never to lose sight of the Lord if we hope to survive the winds and waves of life.

Friends, do you believe that if you “turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face,” to quote the old hymn, do you believe you will be able to walk upon water? Do you believe that? I don't. And, honestly, I do not ever want to, because that kind of faith almost always ends up as a big disappointment. It ends up sinking like Peter and that preacher in the joke.

Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter as he was rescuing him? He said, “You of little faith.” We might “Tut Tut” about that and say he should have trusted completely. But note that Jesus did not say, “You of no faith.” we have already agreed that Peter had more faith than anyone else in the boat. But Jesus called it little faith.

Maybe faith is like knowledge. A little of it is a dangerous thing. A little faith that is confounded by

overblown expectations might lead us, like it did Peter down a very slippery slope. It might lead us to presume that God will act in a certain way just because we want God to, and often without any effort of our own.

We pray for healing and then do not take the medicine. We pray for our children, but do not teach them values. We pray for a good marriage, but do not talk to one another. We pray for peace, but do not work for justice. We pray for the homeless, but do not provide shelter. We pray for the unemployed, but do not offer jobs or training. No wonder we are finally reduced to crying, "Lord, save me!"

I read somewhere of a travelling evangelist who looked for any opportunity he could find to do his preaching. One day he saw a crowd gathered in a public park, so he climbed up on a tree stump and began to share the gospel. Not far away, another fellow heard what was going on and, mocking the preacher, began challenging God, if there was a God, to knock him down. On and on he went in a voice of derision. Finally, the preacher climbed down from his makeshift pulpit, walked over to the challenger and blam. He knocked that sucker flat. The stunned crowd just stood in wide-eyed silence. Slowly, the preacher turned around to them and quietly said, "I never expect God to do what I can do myself.' Good thinking.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. The lesson in all this is that faith in a living, loving Lord is not the same as believing in magic. Christian faith is firm in the conviction that God can do anything God wants to do, even tricks like walking on water if such be the choice. But these are not the norm, and frankly, they are cold comfort when we are faced with real life winds and waves that are the norm; the loss of a loved one, the pain of a family crisis, even the prospect of our own death.

In those moments, those times when we want to shout for help, Mr. or Ms. little faith cries out for Jesus to rescue. But Mr. or Ms. Real – real faith is content simply with knowing that Jesus is there, and in his unfailing love, able to sustain us even through the most violent storm. Once, we get to that point, with the disciples in the boat after their wet friend had been brought back, we can declare to Jesus, "you are not Merlin or Harry Potter the wizards or David Copperfield the magician. You are far more. Truly, you are the Son of God." AMEN