

Don't Lose Sight of What Matters

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When you come to think of it, you might say that we're in a lot of trouble these days. There are billions being spent trying to keep us diverted by the Olympic Games in China. I suppose there's nothing wrong with that but sooner or later we have to deal with the here and now, in a world where everything is changing—faster and faster. In a magazine article this month the chief operating officer of Proctor and Gamble has borrowed a military term to describe the new business world order he sees today: "It's a VUCA world," he says—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

If your personal world seems to be anything like that, how do you respond? Maybe it is something like the story I heard about a man trying to climb a mountain. He was doing OK until he felt the rocks slip under his feet. He caught himself just in time by grabbing onto a tree limb. No one was around but he began to yell as loudly as he could, "someone, please come and help me!!" Finally a voice came from somewhere out of the wind saying, "let go of the tree limb!" So again he cried, "No, someone come and help me!!" And again comes the answer, "Let Go of the tree limb!!" Once more the man called desperately, "Please. Someone help me!" But the answer came back, "I said, Let GO!!" Finally the terrified man called back, "Well—is there anyone else up there??"

In the Gospel this morning there is a storm, and a whole group of terrified men in a boat. Jesus sees his friends in trouble and comes to help them, walking across the lake. Peter sees Jesus coming toward him and asks if Jesus would let him walk on the water too. Jesus says OK, and so Peter gets out of the boat and into the water. But instead of keeping his eyes on Jesus who had called him, he immediately starts worrying about the winds and waves—and he begins to sink.

I suspect that right now your mind may start to wander too, as you hear this story. Walking on water sounds pretty supernatural or fanciful. But that's not the main point of the story anyway. The focus of the story and what should be the focus of our attention is about a relationship. Peter lets fear come between him and Jesus, and he begins to sink. He is saved by re-establishing his relationship with Jesus.

That's what the story really is about, and that's what I hope you're here to find this morning. In a rapidly changing world full of more troubles and decisions to make at home and all around the world, I hope you're here to check out for yourself, "Is there anyone out there—for me?"

Never in my lifetime or yours have there ever been so many cultural and social voices with their answers to our search for meaning and a good life. So when do people decide to find an answer to that question, “Is there anyone out there—for me?” by going to church? I mean not just going to church from habit or a sense of obligation, but really from a sense of need for something that’s missing in life. To slightly paraphrase an answer by the poet Philip Larkin in his poem, “Churchgoing,” you should go to church when “there’s a hunger in yourself to be more serious.” That’s what sent me back to church decades ago, after my college years away: there was a hunger in myself to be more serious about life, because I knew that there was a connection I was missing.

I’ve been thinking ahead this past week to our plans for Rally Day Sunday here soon at St. James’—the first Sunday after Labor Day, which this year is as early as it can ever be: September 7. In a lot of ways I always think of Labor Day as the beginning of a New Year. It’s not just changes of grades and schools—even Congress gets revved up and starts over again after Labor Day.

Church life gets more active for all of us after Labor Day, and for people who have not been very serious about their church life, or for the hundreds of families moving into our Potomac-Rockville-Bethesda region just in the last few months, this is a special time to start over again, to find new direction and new strength. We should be looking for those people and welcoming them here so that they can discover in a new way that there’s something in life that you can hold onto.

Trying to find something you can hold onto doesn’t have to be in a cataclysmic situation like falling down a mountain. Life is not just about good or bad moments; it’s about relationships, and especially yours with the God you’ve known in and through Jesus. Anytime is a good time to work on that relationship, but maybe Rally Day is a good time to start over learning more about who God is, what God does and what God might like or dislike. A relationship with God is more than what you might answer on a survey to a question “Do you believe in God?” A relationship with God means at least what a relationship with any friend would mean—spending more time with that person. Really reading the Gospels, really praying the collects in the prayer book, and then trying to open yourself up to the God you’re starting to know as if for the first time.

That kind of relationship can be a heartwarming, life-giving one for you and for others around you who also are searching for a center, for a balance in life, for a resource that will provide strength. The relationship with God is built in the same way as any other relationship—built by learning, openness, and allowing ourselves to be influenced, even changed by the other. Out of it can emerge a rich, compassionate love, which can only mean a deep, abiding joy.

The Gospel today is about a relationship with Jesus in a time of trouble. I guess you’d agree that standing up in a boat on a stormy sea is a time of trouble, and Peter learned how crucial that time was for him. But there are a couple of things to notice here. The turbulence of an emergency does not create a relationship. Peter had to draw on

something that he had built earlier, just as you and I have to do. I am so sad to see people at times of a death, or illness, or a job loss, or trouble with their teen-age children reaching out for their relationship with God and realizing that actually they have to start all over again. We all want a relationship with God in a time of crisis, but unless it's being built up in earlier or easier times, we may find it difficult to find in harder times. That's why starting over this Rally Sunday is not only a good thing for newcomers, but for people like you and me searching for God in a new way.

Do you remember the story about a law firm senior partner who used to take young members of the firm out fishing in order to evaluate how they might hold up as future partners? He took one young man out on one of those excursions. As they were leaving the dock the young man realized to his horror that he had forgotten the bait. So he hopped out of the boat, ran across the lake, bought the bait and ran back to the boat and got in. At the end of the day the senior partner was asked how the young man had done. The old man replied, "he forgot the bait."

The moral to this is that there's always more to a story than just a man walking on water. The heart of the Gospel story today is about a two-way relationship. It's about our need and God's answer: something to hold onto. That is why we come to the altar this morning, to find his living presence that fills all things and draws us all to himself—around a table at a meal, where we matter, where we care, and everyone has a place. AMEN!