

Father Chapin's Homily



AUGUST 13, 2023 WALKING ON WATER

Our Gospel comes from Mathew 14:22-33

Today, we find ourselves continuing in the 14th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, with the gospel that I think just about everybody knows.

Jesus is *Walking on Water*.

I remember as a child, first hearing this story and thinking, Wow!

Fantastic!

Unbelievable!

As I got older, it became even more unbelievable.

And I'm not sure exactly why, but I don't seem to have much trouble believing the other miracles, the healings, the calming of the *Storm at Sea*, the *Feeding of the 5,000* with the five loaves and the two fish, which we talked about last week, even the *Raising of Lazarus*.

Okay, I get that.

But walking on water?

Somehow, that has always challenged my thinking.

How can a man walk on water?

And I don't think I'm the only one.

I think a lot of us sometimes get stuck in our head with these fantastic stories.

Did this really happen?

And doubt creeps in.

I've heard it said, and I don't believe it's true, but I've heard it said that doubt is the opposite of faith.

But I don't think that's true at all.

It seems to me that doubt is often the doorway to faith.

But it is true, that often we get stuck in our own head with doubt, and things contend to shut down.

And we will see this playing out in our gospel today.

Our gospel picks up exactly where we left off last week in what the church calls a continuous reading.

If you recall last week, Jesus had just gotten terrible news, the death of his cousin, John the Baptist.

A horrible death, a violent death.

And as we had talked about last week, you know, sometimes when you get really bad news, you just don't wanna talk about it.

Sometimes you just wanna be alone.

And this is what Jesus is trying to do, but of course, that's impossible for Him because word has spread far and wide of His radical teachings, not to mention, His incredible miracles.

So, the crowds are huge.

And they're pushing in 'cause they're looking for a healing.

They're looking for a miracle.

They want something from Jesus, which really does describe many of us.

Many of us are looking for a healing.

We're looking for a miracle.

We want something from Jesus.

So, the crowds are pushing in, and His grief turns to pity as He looks over this massive crowd and sees them as sheep without a shepherd.

So, He spends the whole day, sunrise to sunset, teaching them, healing them, and in the end, feeding them.

Now like I said, we talked all about this last week, and I had mentioned last week that the *Feeding of the 5,000* is a rare event that appears in all four of the Gospels.

And the Gospel of John gives us a detail that after this happened, this miracle happened, the crowds wanted to take Him by force and make Him king, thinking no doubt that He was the promised Messiah.

And we've talked about this many, many times, but they had a very specific idea as to what this coming Messiah was going to be.

A warrior king who was going to lead a revolution and drive those evil Romans back into the sea and restore Israel to its former glory as a shiny city on the hill and take their rightful place on the seat of the throne of David.

That's what they're looking for.

And I can only imagine, when they see Jesus do this miracle, they're thinking, "That's the one."

So, they wanna make Him king.

And I'm sure that the disciples were all in with that plan after He had fed the people.

Jesus made His disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side as He dismissed the crowds. After doing so, He went up the mountain by Himself to pray.

So, there's a lot here.

The first thing that catches my eye is the fact that Jesus made His disciples get into a boat.

Other translations have the word "forced" His disciples to get into a boat.

Why would He do this?

I don't know, we're just talking here, but I'm thinking that Jesus was not very happy with His disciples in this moment because I'm guessing it's because they were the cheerleaders to this idea of Jesus being elevated to king, which was obviously something that He did not want.

So, I sense a bit of frustration here on the part of Jesus.

And He takes that frustration into the mountains alone to commune with His heavenly Father in prayer.

Now, there's a whole homily right there.

Because sometimes our lives can become very challenging.

Sometimes we become frustrated, we feel alone, we feel abandoned, and our spiritual condition is weak.

So let me ask you a question.

If the Son of God, the second person in the blessed trinity, sees it fit to steal off and commune with His father when the circumstances of life become difficult, how much more should we?

Meanwhile, the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves for the wind was against it.

This is a perfect description of how life can get sometimes.

Isn't it true?

Sometimes the waves can get really big, and our boat can feel really small as we're tossed up and down, and to and fro, and the winds against it.

I mean that's our life.

Sometimes it feels like we're fighting against the winds of circumstance.

During the fourth watch of the night, He came toward them, walking on the sea.

Wow.

So, let's talk about this.

This is taking place on the Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Gennesaret.

It's about five miles wide.

I've been there.

It's stunning, beautiful.

Surrounded by the Jordanian mountains, the views are breathtaking.

But as beautiful as those mountains are, don't let 'em fool you because they create a very dangerous weather pattern.

It can be a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky.

And then without warning, storm clouds can move over those mountains, and as the colder air rushes down to hit the warmer air of the water, it can kick up a violent squall just like that.

The locals call them boomers, literally a tempest in a teapot.

So, that's what's going on.

And like I said, the lake is about five miles wide.

So on a nice day, you could probably cross it easily in an hour or maybe even less.

But in a storm like this, no, no, no.

Paddling against the wind, against you, it could take up to eight or nine hours.

And this is where the disciples find themselves.

You know, I read this article in the National Geographic.

I love that magazine.

And there was a drought evidently in Israel.

So several years of very little rain, and so the water levels of the lake were very, very low.

And two kids were walking along the beach or along the lake, and they saw a piece of wood sticking out from the mud.

Turned out to be a first-century fishing boat, perfectly preserved because it had been encased in mud for 2,000 years.

I mean you can go see it yourself, the Holy Land.

They built a museum around the boat itself.

So we know exactly what these boats look like.

And the sides of the boats, known as gunnels, they slope down real low to the water to make it easier to drag up the fish, which can be a good thing, but a real problem if you get hit by a five-foot wave.

So this is not a good situation.

And just when it can't get any worse, it does.

During the fourth watch of the night, He came walking toward them on the sea. When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they crying out in fear.

Now a couple things.

Fourth watch of the night, what's that?

Well, that's Roman timekeeping.

And the fourth watch is between 3:00 AM and 6:00 AM.

So this is the darkest part of the night, just before dawn breaks.

Now, another thing that's interesting about this particular line of scripture is, in this culture, they believe that violent storms at sea were demonic activity.

And that ghosts of sailors who have perished at sea would appear in these storms.

Now remember, these guys grew up on this lake, so I'm sure they probably knew a few who had perished.

And so they're understandably terrified.

At once, Jesus spoke to them. "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid. It is I."

The original Greek translation reads, "**I am.**"

Now of course, we know that those two words are loaded with meaning.

"**I am**" harkens back to the burning bush in Exodus when God announces himself as, "**I am who am.**"

"**It is I.**"

"**I am.**"

And then of course, "**Do not be afraid.**"

That's a phrase that we hear time and time again throughout scriptures.

"**Be not afraid.**"

This phrase was adopted by the late great John Paul II.

He made it a hallmark of his Papacy.

"**Do not be afraid.**"

If we could just get that, but do we?

No, not really, no.

We are such fearful people.

And I can assure you that these words did not go too far to assuage the fears of these disciples in this moment because a storm continued to rage.

My friends, you might feel like you're going through a storm today.

Hear me when I say, Jesus sees you in your storm, and He is calling out to you right now.

"**Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid.**"

So Peter, being Peter, says, "**Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.**"

He said, "**Come.**"

Now, try to imagine that you're in this moment.

In my mind's eye, I see the boat pitching to and fro in the waves.

And I seriously doubt that Peter thought at this moment, he was gonna be walking on water.

I mean he grew up on the lake, he knows water.

And the one thing about water is you can't walk on it.

So I imagine he was planning on a short swim to Jesus.

But as he rolls out of the boat, he gets on his knees, and then he rises to his feet, and he starts walking on the water.

Wow, can you imagine?

He was walking on the water; he was doing it.

But then he started looking around, realized what was going on, got stuck in his own thinking.

But when he saw how strong the winds were, he became frightened. And beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me." Immediately, Jesus stretches out His hand to catch Peter.

Now, pay attention, because this is where the deeper meaning of this gospel lies.

When his eyes were on Jesus, he was walking on the water.

He was doing the impossible.

But as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus and got stuck in his own head, "Hey man, what am I doing? I can't do this," he began to sink.

Because, of course, without Jesus, he was right.

He began to sink.

Now, we know that Peter knows how to swim.

Remember, when he spotted Jesus on the beach that morning, Peter, who was lightly clad, jumped into the sea and swam ashore.

So we know he can swim, but swimming's not gonna save him now.

You know, not too long ago, I went to the beach with my family.

And as my family will tell you, I am not a big fan of swimming in the ocean.

Steven Spielberg ruined that for me years ago with a movie called "Jaws."

Now, I was sitting there on the beach and I said, "You know what?"

I'm going to suspend my fears, and I'm gonna join my brother and my niece into the sea."

And so I decided to wade on in.

But instead of, you know, diving in when it got deep enough, I decided, you know what I'm gonna do?

I'm gonna just wade in until I absolutely have to go underwater.

So I'm about waist deep when that first big wave came.

And when I lowered my head to punch through that wave, my friends, I seriously underestimated the power of that wave.

It knocked me backwards and upside down under the water.

I lost my hat.

I lost my sunglasses.

And as I was tumbling backwards, struggling to get up, I finally got up only to be hit by a second wave, which once again knocked me backwards and upside down underwater, and I felt like I was drowning in four feet of water.

Because, my friends, the sea can be very powerful.

"Lord, save me!" Immediately, Jesus stretched out his hand and caught Peter and said, "Oh, ye of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

"Ye of little faith."

We see that phrase appear six times throughout the New Testament.

And every time, it is directed towards His disciples.

Yet, Jesus never offers a faith-growing seminar.

I mean, how do we grow our faith?

How does one have little faith while somebody else has great faith?

And what distinguishes between the two?

Well, I think we find our answer in our gospel today.

Because it has to do with focus.

As I had noted, the moment Peter took his focus off of Jesus and put it on the storm, he sunk.

Despite all he had seen Jesus do, despite calming the storm at sea, despite feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, despite watching Jesus heal all manners of sickness and disease, despite all the evidence, he took his eyes off Jesus.

Now, we might be tempted to sit back and say, "Oh, Peter, how could you do such a thing?"

But let's be honest, isn't this exactly what we do?

I know it's something I do.

I can look back on my own life and see the fingerprints of God all over it where God has intervened in my storm.

Many of you might know or many of you might not, but it was not long ago, about three years, I was crossing a busy highway, and I got hit by a speeding car.

And as I was lying in ICU, I asked, "how did this happen?"

I was focused on the storm.

But like Peter, I cried out, "Lord, save me."

And immediately, He reached out and pulled me up.

My friend, you might be going through a storm today.

Keep your eyes on Jesus through your fear, and He will pull you up and out.

Never forget, Jesus made them get into the boat.

He sent them off.

He knew the storm was coming.

And as He prayed on the mountaintop, He saw the storm, He saw the fear just as He sees your storm and your fear.

Jesus never promised to keep us from the storm.

But what He does promise us is that He will be with us during our storm if we keep our focus on Him.

“Oh Lord, Help me.”

He will lift us up and pull us out of our storm today.

Once upon a time, a man was in prison, and He was chained to the floor.

It was a prison of his own making, built brick by brick through the years of turning away from the will of our heavenly Father to do it his way.

And now, he is chained to the floor, imprisoned by the bricks of his own sin.

And he can't move.

So he cries out, "Lord, save me."

And immediately, the Lord appears and reaches out and lifts him up.

And the chains fall away, and the walls of the prison melted away.

And now, he was walking with the Lord.

But in time, something shiny caught his eye to the left.

Oh, that looks interesting.

And then something else caught his eye to the right.

Oh, what about that?

But Jesus has seen all of it before and keeps walking.

But soon, the man slows down and says, "Hey Jesus, I'll catch up with you real soon," and sits down with what he found.

Next thing you know, he's chained to the floor in a prison of his own making.

And he cries out, "Lord, save me."

And immediately, Jesus appears, reaches out and lifts him up.

My friends, is that man you?

Faith is a long walk in the same direction through the storms, through the distractions as we slowly grow our faith, as we conform ourselves to the image of Jesus.

And the only way we can do this is to keep our eye on Jesus.

You might feel like you're in prison today.

Simply cry out, "Lord, save me," and He will come to you, and lift you up, and take you out.

"Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid."

Let us step out of our boat and allow Him to do so.