

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, August 13, 2023

"Doubt in Action"

One of the things that has amazed me since I've become a pastor is how conversations I have during the week often fit well into whatever the sermon message is for the week. It's funny - my aunt gifted me a tumbler that says "Be careful, or you'll end up in my sermon," and while I don't ever use specific people in my sermon without asking, I do often find conversations that lend themselves well to the theme for the week.

For those of you who have talked to me this week: don't worry, I won't throw you under the bus! But this week, I want to talk about doubt because I think it's actually an incredibly common experience among Christians, and in general among anyone who has any kind of faith background at all. It is quite natural to find yourself experiencing doubt from time to time.

Life is complicated, and when things aren't going the way we hoped, or when life goes in a direction we weren't expecting or didn't plan for, or when something bad happens to a good person, it can be easy to lose faith or begin to doubt in God's presence or God's power in our lives.

We see this happen in today's Gospel reading, and Peter's response to Jesus is reminiscent of the way many of us respond when facing something scary, or confusing, or difficult. I'll share with you an example from my own life that I don't believe I've shared in a sermon before because it's a rather painful experience.

I'll share it at a high level to help demonstrate this notion of doubt and how God responds to us in these times of struggle and pain.

When I was in college, I was involved in a very difficult, very painful, and very abusive relationship situation.

Unfortunately, I spent 4 and half out of the 5 years I was in college in this situation. I won't share a lot of the details, but I will share a vivid memory I have that I will never forget. One night, late, I left the apartment I lived in on my bike. I had no idea where I was planning to go, I just knew I needed to get out, but I ended up on a lawn of one of our campus buildings.

I stopped biking and sat down on the lawn and I just cried and cried. I felt completely alone, completely worthless, I didn't have any friends I could call because I had been discouraged from doing things with anyone other than my partner, and I couldn't call my parents and admit to them my misery because I couldn't listen to them say they told me so.

So I cried, feeling alone and scared.

I shared in last week's sermon that when I was in college, I was not a particularly faithful person, so my concept of God at this point in time was minimal. I truly felt completely alone in that moment and I did not even try to call on God for help.

It was not until years later that I realized that I was not, in fact, alone that night on the lawn. It was the most alone I have ever felt, but looking back, I know I wasn't truly alone. Jesus was reaching out to me, but I didn't realize it, and I think what happened then was that because I wasn't ready to take his hand, Jesus met me where I was and wrapped his arms around me and just held space for my sadness and my loneliness.

So when I read a passage like today's and I see an example of a disciple - one who was there to witness Jesus's work and his ministry and miracles - who begins to doubt when fear creeps in, I remember that it's alright if I hold onto doubt and fear as well. If Jesus didn't turn his back on Peter, who was demanding proof, then Jesus isn't going to turn his back on me, or you, either.

What we see happening in this story is that Peter is suspicious of this person they see walking on the water toward them. In fact, they perceive him as a ghost, but Jesus tells them it is him and also tells them not to be afraid. Peter responds to Jesus not with faith or with trust, but with scepticism, and as is common with the disciples, he asks Jesus for proof.

Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus responds by simply saying "come" and Peter moves onto the water and starts walking toward Jesus. It was then that Peter noticed the wind - a symbol for the things that become distractions or that make us feel doubtful or alone.

In his doubt, Peter begins to sink into the water, which of course would cause anyone to become even more afraid or even to panic. In his fear and desperation and panic, Peter cries out "Lord, save me!"

Jesus responds immediately by reaching his hand out to Peter. Jesus wonders why Peter began to doubt.

But what is important to remember about this story is that even when Peter needed proof, even when he began to lose faith and trust and began to doubt himself and Jesus, Jesus reached his hand out to him. Peter chose to grab hold of Jesus's hand, but I suspect that even if Peter had not reached out for Jesus, Jesus would have dove right into that water and met Peter where he landed.

When I was in my time of need - lonely, heartbroken, desperate, and doubtful about myself and the world, Jesus was reaching out. And when I didn't grab hold, Jesus met me where I was at, held me close, and gave me space. It didn't look like much - it was so subtle that I didn't even notice or think about Jesus in the moment. But he was reaching for me nonetheless.

And I think it is important for us to remember that in the times when we feel most lost, most alone, and most desperate or hopeless, that is when Jesus carries us. We may not be ready to take his hand. We may feel we've lost our faith, we may doubt his love for us, we may wonder why our prayers were not answered or where God was in a particular situation.

But Jesus is always reaching for us. It may not be to give us the answer we hoped for, but the love Jesus has for us does not waver. Even if we find ourselves like Peter - full of doubt and feeling undeserving of his love, Jesus reaches for us. And when we can't or don't know how to reach back, Jesus comes to us in whatever way we need or can accept.

And that is a key part of today's message - sometimes, we are not ready or able to accept Jesus's hand. I was not ready or able to reach out for Jesus in my time of need. And yet, he reaches for us and is ready whenever we are ready to take his hand.

And the story we heard today - the knowledge that Jesus reaches for us even when we feel like our faith is lost - is the reason I was able to find him again. It is the reason I am a pastor today, and the reason I can confidently say that Jesus loves us no matter how we feel about him. Most of us have been like Peter at one point or another.

And Jesus remains our rock on which we stand. All other ground - doubt, fear, shame, and guilt - is sinking sand. If you ever feel like you are sinking, I hope you know that Jesus is there reaching out to you. And, if you heard nothing else from this message today, hear this: if you can't grab on to Jesus in your moment of doubt or fear, he will not leave your side and his hand will always be ready to grab hold of you when you are ready to take it. Amen.

Let us pray: Jesus, today we cry out to you. We know that we often find ourselves full of doubt or uncertainty, and in those times, we are grateful that you are always reaching for us. Your hand is available to pull us to safety when we feel ourselves sinking. We offer our gratitude today, Jesus, that you are there with us even in those times when we are not sure that you are.

We pray that you would help us to look back on the times in our lives when we felt like we were sinking - when we felt lost, hopeless, or unsure - and that we could recognize your presence and the hope that you bring, even in difficult situations. Jesus, we know that sometimes it can be difficult to focus on your presence in times of stress, panic, frustration, or uncertainty.

We pray that you continue to reach out to us, to guide us, and to wrap us in your love, even if we are unable to reach for you. May your presence always be felt, and may you forgive our times of doubt as you forgave Peter and the other disciples who struggled with doubt as well. All of this we pray in your name. Amen.