

Bouncing Faith

Matthew 14:22-33

August 13, 2017

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago I came across a story about a church that was being built (or renovated – can't remember which). The day before they officially opened, they were told by building authorities that their parking lot was too small and they couldn't open. The problem was that the only way they could expand their parking lot was to remove the mountain behind it.

So the minister called together his parishioners for a prayer session to ask God to do something to the mountain, and give the congregation enough money to expand their parking lot.

The next day a contractor showed up asking if his people could get some of the material (mountain rocks) so they could build a road or something on the other side of the mountain ... and they were willing to pay for it.

The end result was part of the mountain was removed, and the congregation got money to pay for their expanded parking lot.

I don't know if the story is true – it's actually been around for a number of years so it may be a type of urban myth.

But it raises an important question about miracles – why do people today keep looking for such mind-boggling miracles and why are we so suspicious or skeptical when we actually find some?

More importantly – ***do we expect miracles in our own life and our own walk with God?***

Today's Gospel lesson deals precisely with the issue of believing and yet not believing ... how open are we to God acting in our own lives and through us to perform miracles through us – Jesus' followers.

THE GOSPEL LESSON

The Basic Story

We know the story - Jesus walks on water. There are actually two stories about Jesus and the Sea of Galilee. In the one, he is in the boat with the disciples, but asleep. A storm arose – the disciples were afraid and woke Jesus up, asking him to save them. He asks why they have such little faith and then calms the sea and the wind. That's **Matthew 8**.

This time around, Jesus isn't even in the boat. The disciples are. A storm arises. They're busy dealing with the storm when they notice something coming towards them. They are frightened by the apparition. We can imagine they're asking whether it's a ghost or sea monster of some kind out to get them.

It's Jesus. He says, "It's only me. Don't be afraid."

Wow – this isn't normal. People don't walk on water ... but Jesus was. Peter jumps out and walks on water too ... for a few seconds until common sense kicks in telling him it's impossible and he begins to sink.

Jesus saves him and comments on their lack of faith. They, on the other hand, are so overwhelmed by the experience that they say simply, "You really are the Son of God."

The Larger Context / Highs & Lows

That's the basic story but if we put it into the larger context, we begin to get a clearer picture of this juxtaposition between belief and unbelief and how we bounce back and forth between them.

The chapter begins on a low note – the arrest and execution of John the Baptist.

Think what this must have meant to Jews of the time. They wanted – more than anything else – a Messiah who would lead them against the Romans. They believed the time was right for God to act – all they had to do was make sure they were in a right relationship with God. If they were, then God would do his part to protect them and defeat their enemies – i.e., the Romans. John the Baptist had fit into that picture. He preached a message of repentance – of people putting themselves right with God.

But, instead of God acting to defeat the enemy, God had allowed John the Baptist to be arrested and killed.

Did God know? Did God care about what was happening to his people? Did God have the power to do anything? Maybe they were simply delusional to believe in God at all.

From that religious low, came a religious high – Jesus and the miracle of feeding the 5000. Did God care? Could God act? The miracle showed that God had acted – through Jesus – through multiplying **5 loaves and 2 fish**. And the response, according to the Gospel of John, was that people – and his disciples – wanted to crown him king – acknowledge that he was the Messiah. People were on a religious high.

People on a **roller coaster of highs and lows in their faith**. That's the larger context in which this story occurs.

The Disciples' Response

The disciples are out in a storm. They see something coming towards them on the water and are terrified.

You would think that, having seen and been part of the miracle feeding of 500 people, their faith would have been strong enough to trust they would be OK – that Jesus wouldn't let anything bad happen to them.

But what had happened that afternoon was forgotten. The religious high had given way to a religious low.

And then Jesus spoke – "It's only me – Don't be afraid" – and they were back on a high ... witnessing another miracle.

Not just witnessing, but doing miracles themselves. Peter started to walk on the water too. **But then reality kicked in** – that's impossible, and Peter started to sink.

Jesus' Response

Jesus' response is worth examining.

We don't know how Jesus reacted – on an emotional level – to the news of John the Baptist's death. Remember, John the Baptist was – according to Scripture – his cousin. We are told that he tried to withdraw – to find time to be by himself – **but the people wouldn't leave him alone**. They needed to hear something – they needed some kind of encouragement that God was still around.

So Jesus stayed where he was needed, and did what he could. At the end of the day, he performed one of his greatest miracles – the feeding of the 5000.

That's exactly what the people needed to get back on a religious high and responded by trying to make him king.

Jesus, however, knew that the people's immediate needs had been met and that it was time to look after himself. He **sent people away – withdrew to reconnect with God and pray** –

And then came back into the chaos of daily living – **and promptly performed another miracle** – walking on water.

LINK TO TODAY

When we put all of this information together, we have a message for us – and how to deal with believing and not believing at the same time or bouncing back and forth with our faith.

A MESSAGE FOR US

Rollercoaster Faith

First – I want to emphasize that bouncing back and forth in anything is normal. **We have good days. We have bad days.** It's true about relationships. It's true about work. It's true about our faith.

There are times when we have all the faith in the world. We believe in God. We believe in Jesus. We believe that God is active in, and can change, the world. That's a high point in our faith.

Then there are days when **so-called "reality"** sets in. We see all the problems and challenges in life and common sense tells us there is no magic fix. That's a low point in our faith.

We alternate between being moments when we are totally devoted to God and moments when we could care less about God or the church.

Our lives are often a rollercoaster of faith. Most times, we don't know why.

I've had friends go to Christian rallies and crusades, Christian retreats, and even Christian camps like Gracefield. Surrounded by a Christian community, they find it easy to have their faith renewed and restored – charged up again and ready to face any challenge ... then they come back home and within an hour or two, they found themselves yelling at their children, cursing the computer or car, and wondering what happened to all that joy and faith they had just experienced.

Had it been nothing more than an emotional high?

In some cases, possibly – yes. In many cases, however, I think something, more fundamental is going on.

Steps to a Stable Faith

Let's start at the beginning.

As Christians, we accept and believe in God. We accept and believe that Jesus died on the cross for us.

Unfortunately, that's where a lot of us stop in our faith. **We never learn to develop a faith on which we can build** – we never learn how Jesus can help us live our own lives. We never learn how to tap into our faith to face the problems of life.

The result is a rollercoaster of belief and unbelief – of bouncing back and forth in our faith and in our expectations of God acting in our own lives – to perform miracles – and feeling a need to be more practical and grounded in common sense.

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That's the beginning of our faith journey.

The next step is to realize that we need to spend time with God.

For many of us, that's hard. We are so overbooked that we often have no time for ourselves let alone for God. We cram in the odd prayer, read the Bible now and again – participate in a Bible study now and again – but essentially try to just keep ourselves afloat. Our religious – spiritual life – has to make do with whatever is left.

But Jesus shows us that that is the wrong way to go. Our relationship with God should not be a **leftover relationship. God deserves better – and we deserve better.**

We need to recharge ourselves and the only real way to do that is to spend time in prayer with God – not just asking and praying for people and situations – but also taking time to listen for what God has to say to us.

The third step is to expect God to be active in our lives. To expect miracles to happen to us. Too often we leave God in the pages of the Bible – and forget to bring him into our lives. If miracles don't happen, it's not because God isn't active but because we don't ask.

Personal Examples

Exams

I sometimes ask youth whether they pray before exams. Often, the answer I get is “no” – like they don’t expect God to help them.

I always had a couple of twigs or blades of grass put together as a cross whenever I wrote an exam. I would frequently ask God for help with answers – and sometimes a whole page would pop into my head with just the text I needed.

Dad in Atlantic City

The last time I was here, I mentioned that we never went to church very often when I was growing up. But, beyond insisting that I read the Bible and drilling me on Bible passages, my parents had a very simple faith in God, and expected God to act in their lives.

I’d like to share a couple of stories. The first probably took place in the 1940s. There was some kind of convention in Atlantic City and my father went with a group from the company where he worked. The problem was that no one had remembered to bring money with them to pay the hotel bill – and this was before the days of credit cards.

No problem. Every time my father passed a slot machine in the casino, he would put in some money and would win. He won enough to pay the hotel bill for the entire group. When they got back home, someone asked him why he wasn’t submitting an expense claim so he could be reimbursed. His answer: “The money I won came from God. It wasn’t mine to keep.” The group needed money. God provided.

BMO and the Hydro Bill

The next story comes from the 1970s. My mother and I had just moved to Ontario from Quebec and had rented a place in Brampton. I had a job. She didn’t. She was trying to decide whether to move back to the States or stay in Canada. A hydro bill came in - \$200.

I hadn’t gotten my first pay yet and Mom discovered that the bank had lost the money from her house sale in Montreal so she didn’t have any money either – eventually the bank did find her money but not in time to pay the bill.

One morning we got the mail and – in one of the envelopes – a money order for \$200 – and it hadn’t expired.

You see, we had had a mail-order business that had closed a few years earlier. Someone in Finland, I believe, had made a purchase and sent the money order to pay for his items.

The money order took over 2 years to get us – Finland by way of South America, Hawaii, Montreal and finally Brampton – just when we needed it.

When I look back at their lives, I realize they didn’t bounce around that much in their faith. There was a stability about them – their deep trust in God.

It’s something that we often cheat ourselves in – we don’t expect God to be active in our lives so we don’t turn to God in order to be recharged so we can face whatever happens in our lives – and so we end bouncing back and forth.

CONCLUSION

I had a friend who converted from Christianity to Buddhism. He wanted me to understand why he was converting. What I remember the most about our discussion was one statement:

Christianity says it is the answer – but it doesn’t tell us how to do it. Buddhism provides a guidebook or instruction book.

He was right – often we say “Jesus is the way – the answer” – as though that’s all there is to faith. The result... when something happens, we get lost and find ourselves bouncing around between highs and lows.

One Christian theologian – don’t remember who now and I’m paraphrasing a bit – said the problem with most Christians is that we try to write our doctoral comprehensive exams while we are still in grade school.

We have faith – but don’t take the time to grow in our faith or deepen our relationship. Our Gospel lesson today does give us instructions on how to do this ... take time for God ... bring God into our lives ... and you will be surprised at the miracles God is able to do in and through you.

AMEN.