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St. Benedict's, Los Osos
Sunday, August 13, 2023
Matthew 14:22-33

I don't know about you, but I cannot stop thinking about the town of Lahaina in Maui, about the wildfires that swept through and destroyed that town, and the people who have died or been displaced. My heart breaks for what those people have been through, and the journey that is now ahead of them.

As Californians, we are not strangers to natural disasters. This past winter we survived horrific flooding, and every year we live through what we call "fire season."

We sometimes read today's Gospel reading and somehow imagine the disciples in a boat without any real consequence. That their water was more like a bathtub than a giant lake. That they hadn't grown up hearing about stories of people going out to sea on that same lake and never coming home again. That the natural disaster of strong wind over the water wouldn't evoke the same terror that people experience in natural disasters today.

What we translate as "the wind was against them," in the original Greek, conveys not only an opposition, but that the wind was hostile towards them, as if out to get them. Anyone who has ever lived through a natural disaster knows what it is to feel like the world, very creation itself, is out to get them. It evokes feelings of being all alone, and helpless.

The 16th-century Spanish mystic, Saint John of the Cross, took this theme and wrote one of the most famous Christian poems of all time, called *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

Maybe you know what Saint John of the Cross was describing. This sense that one previously felt safe and secure in God's presence, but that the divine closeness had waned to the point where it now felt entirely gone, and one is all by one's self.

The disciples had not only a dark night at sea, but a dark night of the soul, where they had felt abandoned by God and left to the terror of impending death.

This is the context in which Peter was asked to get out of the boat. He had been battered around through a long and dark night both literally and figuratively, and now, was asked to step out in faith, both literally and figuratively.

Could you have done it? Could you, after having survived a life threatening ordeal, trust again so quickly? Could you, after having navigated a dark night of the soul, a feeling of having been abandoned to the life threatening ordeal by the very God that is supposed to love and protect you, could you trust again so quickly?

I don't know that I could have, if I had been Peter that day.

When people meditate on this passage, there is often an element of judgment against Peter in the moment when he begins to sink. After all, he had already successfully been walking on the water just the instant before, walking over towards Jesus. After having lived through that miracle, how come he so quickly lost faith?

But Peter could have been any one of us. That is to say, any one of us could have been Peter.

So maybe it's worth pausing and considering Peter as a human being who just lived through not only a dark and stormy night, but the dark night of the soul, and was now being asked to do the impossible: not just walk on water, but trust again. From this perspective, Peter's moment of doubt asks of us nothing more than compassion.

It's possible, though, that the judgment passed against Peter in this passage comes from the assessment that Jesus passed judgment. After all, Jesus did say, "you of little faith."

But what if Jesus is not passing judgment at all? What if Jesus, in his compassion, notes that in Peter's doubt, his faith is small, like a mustard seed. Which can grow to be the greatest of shrubs, where the birds come and make their nests. Maybe Jesus is saying, "you whose faith is like a mustard seed, be it little, you have all the faith you need, and that will serve you more than your doubt." What if Jesus, in his compassion, is assuring Peter that Peter has, and has always had, everything he could ever need.

In Saint John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul*, the darkest part of the soul's journey, where one wrestles with helplessness and abandonment of the divine presence, brings one to a place of absolute surrender, and at that moment, one finds oneself at union with God.

Peter, in his fear, surrendered and prayed to be saved. Jesus took his hand, and together, in union, they walked to the boat.

We all know that the people of Lahaina and of all of Maui may experience the dark night of the soul in the days, weeks, and maybe even years to come.

It is completely understandable that they might feel the helplessness and abandonment that Saint John of the Cross talks about, and Peter experienced that day on the sea. And yet, they will remain as close to the heart of God as they ever were, if not closer.

You can't always see how close God is in the dark night, in the midst of crashing waves, or, in their case, in the midst of rubble and ashes, but God is there, all the same, holding out the divine hand.

Have you ever experienced anything like what Peter did, or what Saint John of the Cross wrote about? Like the wind and waves were actually against you, and you didn't

know where to look for safety? As if, in that moment, you had succumbed to doubt and fear, and weren't sure if you had enough faith to sustain you?

I know that I have.

I am all too familiar with the prayer, "Lord, save me" and the feeling that my faith was no larger than a mustard seed.

If we believe that Jesus looked at Peter with compassion, and not judgment, then we can believe that Jesus sees us, too, with nothing but compassion, and assures us, too, that faith the size of a mustard seed is all we need to reach out and take hold of Jesus' out-stretched hand.

That is the invitation of the Gospel today. To know that we come from a long line of people whose faith has been battered by the storm, whose trust has been eroded by feeling abandoned, and so, in these feelings, we are not alone. And, even in those moments, whatever faith we have, no matter how small, is truly all we need to help us to find the hand that is reaching out to save us, just waiting for us to grab hold. I don't know what storms you and your loved ones are facing, what darkness you and your loved ones feel surrounded by, but I do know this: before you even have the chance to pray, "Lord, save me," Jesus is already by your side, holding you up, so you can walk back to the boat together.

And if your faith seems small, too little to be of much help, Jesus assures us today, that is all we need.