

Pentecost 12 (14A)  
August 7, 2005  
Christ Church, Andover  
The Rev. Jeffrey Shilling Gill

Matthew 14:22-33 – Jesus and Peter walking on the water

Peter became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Fear. One of the first books of serious theology I ever read, probably when I was in my late teens, was called *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, written by Charles Shultz. Amazing what you can learn from Charlie Brown and all the characters.

There’s one Peanuts cartoon strip where Charlie Brown goes to Lucy for a nickel’s worth of psychiatric help. She proceeds to pinpoint his particular ‘fear’. Perhaps, she says, you have hypengyophobia, which is the fear of responsibility. Charlie Brown says no. Well, perhaps you have ailurophobia, which is the fear of cats. No. Well, maybe you have climacophobia, which is the fear of staircases. No. Exasperated, Lucy says well, maybe you have pantophobia, which is the fear of everything. Yes, says Charlie, that is the one!

Fear – part of our fallen condition.

Peter, following Jesus, whom he sees walking on the water, gets out of the boat, but becomes afraid, sinks, and then is rescued.

Just over a week ago, the world got a glimpse of what it must have been like for Jesus’ disciples as Peter walked out of the boat. The space shuttle Discovery took off from launch pad 39B of the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

The past few years have been difficult for NASA. It has been two and a half years since the tragic loss of the Columbia space shuttle and crew. The launch of the Discovery shuttle had been bumped back several times due to safety concerns. When Discovery finally launched, many people stopped to pray and many literally stopped breathing for a moment or two. Even the commentators on the radio and television were silent for a number of seconds. We are all still here on planet Earth, but we were watching a brave crew of seven people step off of the boat, so to speak, despite many worries for their safety. We will continue to hold our breath until their safe landing scheduled for tomorrow. And the spacewalk by one of the crew to remove potentially hazardous material from the underbelly of the ship was taking the “stepping out of the boat” theme to another whole level.

Perhaps part of our fascination with the space program has to do with the vicarious risk-taking we all get to do as we sit on our couches and watch our television screens. We’re happy to have others take risks. We’re not so sure that we want to.

And then there’s this morning’s dramatic rescue of seven Russian submariners...(reference NYT or Globe front page articles).

Sometimes we feel like Charlie: we are afraid of everything. We are afraid of ourselves. We are afraid of people. We are afraid of the future. We are afraid of the past. We are afraid of life. We are afraid of death.

Every person, every Christian, must fight fears of one kind or another. Being a Christian doesn't exempt us from that. Even Paul, the seemingly fearless apostle to the Gentiles, had to face his fears. Paul had fallen flat on his face in Athens. He did exactly what he intended not to do, and in his own eyes he had failed. He wrote of his arrival in Corinth: "For when we came into Macedonia we had not rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings; within were fears." Paul was full of fears, just like you and I –the fear of inadequacy, the fear of failing.

Some of our fears have to do with God, too – whether God really is paying attention or not. One of the great fears of the ancient people was that God would fall asleep. When the prophets of Baal could not get their gods to rain down fire on the top of Mt. Carmel, Elijah taunted them: Maybe your God is asleep, he said. On the other hand, the Israelites took great comfort in the fact that the God of Israel neither slumbered nor slept.

Over and over again the message we hear in scripture is "*fear not.*" When Abram took his family to the Promised Land he feared that he was turning his back on everything he knew, leaving his security for the unknown. God spoke to him: *Fear not* Abram, I am your shield and your reward will be great

When the children of Israel stood at the Red Sea and could see Pharaoh's chariots coming on the horizon, they cried out that they would all be slaughtered. Moses said to them: Stand still, *fear not*, and see the salvation of the Lord.

When the angel of the Lord came to Mary and said that she would bear a child, she trembled with fear. What would become of her? But the angel said: *Fear not* Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Fear is a part of being human. But what do we do with our fear? One option is to let it rule us. Perhaps that's what the other eleven apostles did – and as a result, they never had the same experience Peter had – both of walking on the water, and of being borne up by the hand of Jesus when he sank. Fear keeps us from experiencing a lot of life if we let it. And then we are left talking about other people's experiences. Another option is for us to face into our fears, look them in the eye, put our hand in God's hand, and step out in faith.

Five years ago right now I was on a cross-country trip with my son, George. He was 12 years old, and we were on a motorcycle together all the way from Portland, Maine, to San Diego, California. Every morning when we woke up, got out of our tent and got back on that big motorcycle, I had to face my fears all over again. I was always cautious for my own safety, but I was terrified at the thought that anything would happen to George. I couldn't bear the thought that I would do anything – or that anything out of my control might happen – that would put him at risk. Fear kept us from being careless, but we decided it would not keep us from an experience that had so many other wonderful things about it.

I'm not the only Episcopal priest who likes to ride motorcycles! The retired bishop of Michigan is a motorcycle enthusiast, and we have a great time talking about our expeditions.

There's also a priest, I read recently, named Wes Seigler who loves motorcycles. He tells about being in a motorcycle shop one day, drooling over a big Honda and wishing that he could buy it. A salesman came over and began to talk about his product. He talked about speed, acceleration, excitement, the attention-getting growl of the pipes, racing, risk. He talked about how the good-looking girls would be attracted to anyone riding on such a cycle!

Then he discovered that Wes was a minister.... Immediately the salesman changed his language and even the tone of his voice. He spoke quietly and talked about good mileage and visibility. It was indeed a "practical" vehicle.

Wes observed: "Lawnmower salespersons are not surprised to find clergy looking at their merchandise; motorcycle salespeople are. Why? Does this tell us something about clergy and about the church? Lawnmowers are slow, safe, sane, practical, and middle-class. Motorcycles are fast, dangerous, wild, thrilling." Then Wes asks a question: "Is being a Christian more like mowing a lawn or like riding a motorcycle? Is the Christian life safe and sound or dangerous and exciting?" He concludes, "The common image of the church is pure lawnmower –slow, deliberate, plodding. Our task is to take the church out on the open road, give it the gas, and see what the old baby will do!"

Matthew's gospel was written at a time when the church was being persecuted for its faith. Peter had very possibly already been crucified by the time it was written, and when the church read this story about danger, fear, and death, and ultimately Jesus' command over the forces that threatened them, it brought comfort. We too should not fear when we take risks for the sake of the gospel.

A church that is cautious and afraid and without faith will sink. Those who set out in faith, taking risks, and putting their trust in God, will be saved. I hope that's the kind of people, and the kind of church we will be.