

“Unraveled by Uncertainty”
Matthew 14:22-33

Since our Bible story today is about water and boats, I will begin with a story told by Megan McKenna. “Once upon a time there were two groups of battleships on maneuvers. The weather was terrible, pea soup fog, high winds and seas. The second night out was worse. The captain stood the bridge all night, wary of just second-hand reports. He didn’t want to chance the battleships of the other group colliding with them in the open seas. All night he checked on the night sky and what could be seen. Toward dawn the officer yelled, ‘Light on the starboard side, sir!’ The captain yelled back, ‘Is she steady or moving?’ A pause and the reply, ‘Sir, she’s steady!’ ‘Send a message ASAP,’ he roared. ‘Change course 20 degrees immediately.’ The message was relayed and sent. Then back came a reply on the radio that was passed on to the captain, ‘Sir, they suggest you change the course.’ The captain was furious. He turned and yelled, ‘You tell them I am a captain and I’m ordering them to change course, 20 degrees hard now. Don’t these fools know we are on a collision course?’ The message was sent. Then the reply came. ‘I’m an ensign second class, and I suggest you change course now.’ The captain was near spitting, and the light was fast approaching. ‘Damn it, you tell them I’m the captain of a battleship and they’d better obey my orders immediately.’ The message was sent. Back came the reply, ‘I’m a lighthouse’.” And the battleship turned.

I love this story not just because it is funny but because it illustrates the fallacy of the illusion of certainty about what we know. What we know for certain could come into question any moment. And we are especially familiar with that now during the time of crisis. What we thought we knew about life and the world has come into question. And things keep changing so quickly. What seems to be certain right now could or most likely will change next week. While our instinctive reaction to uncertainty is anxiety and dismay, there is a great opportunity for growth, healing, and faith in all of the unraveling of our certainties. Despite the pain we are experiencing, there is a new level of awareness and healing that could be ours if we approach this time with faith.

We look at the example of Peter in his attempt to walk on water with Jesus. We often think of this story as a model for working a little harder at faith so that one could walk on water. Yet, the story also has the potential to show us that sinking and feeling overwhelmed can be a time of great rescue! I want to focus today on what Peter learned and experienced when he started to sink. This was a time of fear and uncertainty for Jesus, his disciples, and all his followers. Just before this episode in Matthew's Gospel, the writer had recounted how Herod Antipas beheaded John the Baptist and had his head presented on a platter. Matthew has John's disciples come and tell Jesus of the execution. John the Baptist was the one who preached and prepared for the ministry of Jesus. He was his colleague in ministry, his cousin, and his mentor in ministry.

Matthew's Gospel account had told us of the beheading of John the Baptist - killed because he denounced Herod Antipas' marriage to his brother Philip's wife when Philip was still alive (a violation of Jewish law). Jesus went to a lonely spot as a direct response to John's execution. Maybe Jesus saw the writing on the wall for him. He

could be next. What about his vision of the Kingdom of God as an alternative to the powers of domination? The feeding of the 5000 and the walking on the sea, in that sense, came at a time of great distress for Jesus and his disciples. The world was closing in on them! The dream of the Kingdom of God becoming a reality in their lives seemed so unlikely under the political circumstances of their day.

The disciples were afraid in the boat because of the storm that was battling their boat, their response is that of great fear also. They first think that Jesus was a ghost. Then when Peter joined Jesus in walking on water, that only lasted a few seconds because of his fear. We all love Peter for his enthusiasm. He is the one who often responds and ventures out of the comfort of what is known. Peter is often impatient yet passionate. Peter is full of faith and doubt at the same time. He is the one who swears he would never deny Jesus, but is the one who ends up abandoning Jesus at the hour of his greatest need. Peter is the one who wants to be with Jesus walking on the sea. He is the one who longs to walk in the footsteps of Jesus to conquer the fears of the world and to not falter. His excitement about joining Jesus on this risky adventure carries him through, but not for long! He makes it for a few seconds, but when he becomes aware of the raging dangers around him once more, he begins to sink! Yet, in that moment of great fear, we see the connection between him and Jesus grow even stronger. In fact, when they get back in the boat, that is when Peter says, "Truly you are the Son of God." This was a huge shift for Peter and the disciples in a time when that phrase was used to describe the emperor. Instead of swearing their allegiance to the emperor, Peter and the disciples gave their whole hearts to Jesus and confessed him as the Son of God. This was not a theological statement about certitudes and beliefs. It was a change of heart and mind that came out of a mystical experience, one that defies any logical explanation. The transformation of Peter and the other disciples through that great experience of uncertainty was essential for their ability to navigate the uncertainty of the future that was ahead of them. They had to learn to navigate so many uncharted waters and the only trusted guidance they needed was staying open to God's guiding presence. Whenever their certainty unraveled, they had to lean into faith to show them a new way forward.

In his book, *Finding God in the Waves*, Mike McHargue tells about his personal experience of losing his faith that was so based on certainties. He grew up in a fundamentalist church where he believed in doctrines and teachings as factual and thus, there was no room for any doubt, science, or mystery in his belief system. When he started engaging science more seriously, he lost his faith. He could not reconcile the facts of science with the claims of faith. He became an atheist until he had a couple of mystical experiences of the presence of God which transformed his whole life. He was attending a conference about creativity and it was led by people of faith. The first part of his mystical experience was during communion when he felt that he did not belong but then heard the voice of Jesus speak to him. The second part is described like this, "So I walked down the steps at the back of the hotel to the beach. It was between 2:00 and 3:00 am, dark and still. I looked at the ocean, but it was so black, I couldn't tell where the water ended the sky began -a powerful force that I could hear and feel but not see. As metaphors for God go, that was pretty good, so I faced the waves and started to

pray. I said something like this: God, I don't know who or what you are. I don't know anything about you. I don't know what your relationship to the Bible is. I can't unlearn all the things that made me believe you aren't real. They're still there, and they tell me you can't exist. If you're real, if you have consciousness, will, and power, tell me: How can I be here? Why did you bring me to California to learn about you from a famous preacher, while right now children are starving to death all over the world? Why answer my mom's prayer, when another mother's prayer that her child be spared from warlords goes unanswered? God, that doesn't seem like love. That seems like evil. How can you just watch and do nothing? People are hurting and dying down here....So let's make a deal. I will try to do the best I can to do good in the world. I will serve others, and I will work against suffering. But I have to keep asking these questions about your justice and mercy. And I can't forget about science. Let's keep talking about this, You and I. I don't ever want to be away from you again. I can't do that anymore. All I know is, I met Jesus tonight. When I said the word Jesus, the waves rushed toward me. I was standing high up on the beach, 25 feet or more above the waves, but the water still rushed up and over my feet -all the way up to my shins. I thought about what Rob had said: that Christ's last act of service before His crucifixion was to wash the feet of His followers. I said, 'Is that you, God? Is this really happening?' And the whole world fell away, like the veil lifted from the face of a bride on her wedding day." Then in reflecting on his experiences of both atheism and then of the Spirit, McHargue wrote, "I've learned that the need for certainty is an addiction we can kick-that it's possible to have faith, and even follow Christ, without needing to defend historical Christianity like a doctoral thesis. We can approach beliefs not as gems to be minded from the earth and protected with clenched fists, but as butterflies that land on an open hand -as gifts to enjoy but not possess."

In both the experiences of Peter and of McHargue, we are invited to remain open by letting go of certainty. Living life with the attitude of learner and of a mystic can help us to walk the earth relying on the wisdom of the universe. When our certainties unravel, the invitation is to stay open to love, to mystery, to learning new ways, and to God's rescue. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." Amen.