

## "Fear Filled"

1 Kings 19:9-18 & Matthew 14:22-33

August 7, 2005

Rabbi Feldman had been having trouble with his congregation. It seemed they could agree upon nothing, and controversy filled the air until the Sabbath itself became an area of conflict, and unhappiness filled the synagogue. The president of the congregation organized a meeting of 10 elders and the rabbi. They met in the conference room of the synagogue, sitting about a magnificent mahogany table. One by one the issues were dealt with and on each issue, it became more and more apparent that the rabbi was a lonely voice in the wilderness. The president said, "Come, Rabbi, enough of this. Let us vote and allow the majority to rule." He passed out the slips of paper, and each man made his mark. The slips were collected and the president said, "You may examine them, Rabbi. It is 11 to one against you. We have the majority."

Whereupon the rabbi rose to his feet, "So", he said, "You now think because of the vote that you are right and I am wrong. Well, I stand here -- and he raised his arms impressively -- and call upon the Holy One of Israel to give us a sign that I am right and you are wrong." Suddenly, there came a frightful crack of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning that struck the mahogany table and cracked it in two. The room was filled with smoke and the president and the elders were hurled to the floor.

But the rabbi was untouched, his eyes flashing and a grim smile on his face. Slowly, the president lifted himself above what was left of the table. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear, and his clothing was in disarray. He said, "All right, 11 to two. But we still have the majority."

Imagine the audacity. Faced with the power of God often we still want to pull rank and do it our way. I don't know if any of us, faced with that kind of impressive demonstration of the power and will of God would ever think to object and still do things our way. We can laugh at such a story - but in fact, it is really not so funny. In many ways we do exactly what the story says. We figure life out and too often, what God may or may not do is irrelevant.

**The Gospel text today is one of those great and well known texts. Jesus comes toward the disciples walking on the water. We always joke about weather or not a person can do that. Jesus invites Peter to do it and he does. But Peter is more afraid of the water than he is in awe of the power of Jesus and very quickly begins to sink. It is a great story that can conjure up all kinds of fun stuff. I am sure that you heard about the three pastors that went out fishing one day. Two of them, the Catholic**

priest and the Methodist minister were long time residents of the area and were using the fishing trip to get to know the new Lutheran pastor. They maneuvered their boat to a spot not too far from shore and set the anchor and began fishing. After a while the Priest said that he wanted to get something out of their car and simply rose and stepped out of the boat and walked across the water to the shore and returned the same way. This really impressed the new Lutheran Pastor but the Methodist minister didn't seem to me too awed by the whole thing so he said nothing. Later the Methodist pastor excused himself and stepped out of the boat and walked across the water just as easily as the Priest had earlier. Again the Pastor was impressed at what faith these two must have but said nothing. When the time came that he felt the need to return to shore, he didn't want to embarrass himself by showing a lack of similar faith, so he just rose and stepped over the side of the boat and immediately sank to the bottom. The priest looked at the Methodist Pastor and said: "I suppose that we should have told him where the rocks are." +

Jesus comes to the disciples walking across the stormy sea. Like the other miracles we would like to figure out how he did that. There were no rocks to step on that far from land. But the fact is that how or why Jesus walked out on the water to the disciples on that stormy sea is hardly the point. I suspect that there are quite a number of things that we could discuss as the more relevant messages of this event. But the one that I wanted to note today is the fear - fear that filled Peter - and the 'fear' of God that was lacking.

Sometimes I struggle with what title to give a sermon. I thought I might entitle it "Don't 'Peter Out'" - I like it. I wonder if the expression "Peter out" comes from this text - Peter boldly jumping out of the boat ready to rush to Jesus where I suspect Peter believes he will find safety and peace in the midst of the storm that is raging about them - but very quickly, he sinks in fear. Even the strongest faith - even the boldest of believers can find that faith floundering in the face of the storms of life. -- Then I thought maybe I would entitle the sermon "Going overboard on faith". I think that there are times when people are so excited about the faith that they rush into things that they are not prepared for - and they find themselves in deep water. - - - There are so many forces in our lives that swirl around us and distract us from the faith that could up hold us that it is perhaps good to be reminded that we can still sink in the waters. Even when we have heard the word of God and chose to live by faith the world around us can be overwhelming.

An amazing thing happens in the text when Jesus appears. The disciples must have been exhausted by the hours of rowing against the wind. When those storms arise on the sea of Galilee they can be very sudden and violent. The feeling of being tired would have become of secondary importance to the fear they would be experiencing - even by the most experienced sailor or fisherman. But seeing Jesus, Peter seems to forget all about his fears. Suddenly all he can see is Jesus -- "If it is you, Jesus, tell me to come out there with you." And Jesus says, "Come". Fear of the storm and even the knowledge that you don't just walk on water were totally gone as Peter looks at Jesus and steps out. But then the wind roared again. And Peter looked away

**from Jesus into the storm and the churning water beneath his feet. He must have sunk like a rock. He probably would have drowned. But in his helplessness he remembered Jesus nearby and simply cried out, "Lord, save me!" And in that moment Jesus reached out and grabbed him. He stepped out on faith but the power of the storm was more convincing than the power of Jesus and he sunk, and he could have drowned.**

**The winds swirl around us. There are so many distractions - there are so many storms. We do not know how we can make it and we sink into the waters so easily - so naturally. The storms come and the waters that we stand on can begin to close in around us. The waters of fear, doubt, depression are powerful. We can sink into old habits - old sins - old fears - and we take our eyes off Jesus and forget faith in favor of fear. It is so easy to become fear filled instead of being filled with the fear of the power of God. Perhaps this Gospel text is a call to keep our eyes on Jesus - to be faith filled as we step out into the storms that come against us. I wish I knew how to do that when the storms so easily fill us with fear. I am pretty sure that Peter wished he knew the answer to that too. Believing in the power of Christ we will have those moments when we become fear filled and sink as Peter did. But then he cried out again - "Lord, save me!" And Jesus reached out and lifted him again. Be faith filled. And when the waters churn and fear comes, join Peter in calling to this Lord of compassion and He will again reach out to**

**you.**

**AMEN**