

“In This Moment” by Deborah SokoLove

8 August 2011



The 8th Sunday After Pentecost

When I signed up to preach for today, it was with the intention to talk about what I had learned since my cancer diagnosis last summer, and to celebrate a full year of living cancer-free. In this time of mourning Kate's sudden passing, such celebration seems out of place, an unseemly self-congratulation that is out of step with the pain and grief that still permeate our life together. Nonetheless, what I am bringing this morning does grow out of the heightened awareness of mortality that I have been living with for this past year, which has been made even more poignant by the events of the last two weeks. I offer these reflections on the Word in deep gratitude and humility for the grace and love of God that is offered through this community.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We seem to be in the season of old, familiar Bible stories. Last week, we heard about Jacob wrestling with the angel and Jesus and the disciples feeding 5000 families with five loaves of bread and two fish. This week, Jacob's older sons are selling the youngest, Joseph, off to some passing traders, and Jesus and Peter are walking on water.

As you recall, before that memorable picnic, Jesus had been preaching to the crowds. Afterwards, he needed some time alone to pray.

So Jesus sends the disciples off on a boat, and goes up a nearby mountain. But in the morning, when he arrives back at the beach, Jesus sees that the wind is up, the waves are whipping wildly, and the little boat filled with disciples is far off shore.

Then, the gospel-writer tells us in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone of voice, Jesus walks across the water towards his friends. Understandably, the disciples are terrified and think they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus calms them so effectively that Peter jumps out of the boat and starts walking on top of the water, too. Then – and I imagine this a little like Wily Coyote running off a cliff, and only starting to fall when he looks down – all of a sudden Peter gets distracted by the wind, and starts to sink into the waves.

Jesus, of course, catches him, and asks him why he doubted. Then, the text tells us, Jesus and Peter get in the boat with the disciples, the wind stops, and everyone worships Jesus as the Child of God.

This is one of those miracle stories that upset a lot of people. Some look for scientific explanations of how Jesus could have walked on the water – maybe the water was only ankle deep and he only looked like he was walking on top of it; maybe some rare combination of currents and cold atmospheric temperatures allowed him to walk on ice; maybe he was so in tune with every bit of creation that he could re-arrange his molecules to line up with the molecules in the water. Others suggest that this story is out of sequence, and really belongs among the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus. Still others simply dismiss it out of hand as a legend, ascribing impossible feats to person remembered as particularly holy.

But I am less interested in the literal, factual level of this story than in what we can learn from it about our own lives. In particular, I want to focus on the moment when Peter is doing fine, walking on top of the waves, then suddenly notices that the wind is howling around him. Suddenly, Peter becomes distracted and frightened, and begins to sink.

Don't we all do that? Don't we all go along with our daily lives, doing what needs to be done in the moment, hugging our friends and loved ones, enjoying the flowers in our neighbor's garden, eating dinner, giving a dollar or a care pack to the guy who asks us for money on the street? Then, suddenly, we remember that Congress has just barely averted a major crisis and now the stock market has just lost 500 points; or we've heard that more people are being attacked in the Metro lately; or yet another tropical storm is threatening Haiti; or some other catastrophe is looming on the horizon. Losing our focus on this present moment, we start to worry. Our blood pressure goes up; our bodies secrete stress hormones; we find ourselves unable to focus on the task at hand, fearful that at some

indeterminate future something terrible will happen. We'll get cancer; we'll be mugged; we'll have to choose between going to the doctor and buying food; the world as we know it will come to an end. Like Peter, we begin to sink beneath the waves of fear.

Of course, disasters do happen. Right now, that awareness is all too real, as we continue to live in the grief and shock of Kate's sudden passing. We know in our bodies and in our hearts that pain is an unavoidable part of being human. Indeed, it is that common sense, everyday knowledge that fuels our fears. Peter knew that people really do drown; that storms sometimes sweep people overboard; that loved ones and we, ourselves, could vanish beneath the waves in an instant. Peter also knew that walking on top of the water was absurd, impossible, so far beyond his abilities that he had never even imagined it.

Yet, there he was, walking on water, trusting that, since Jesus had called him, he would be all right. And, in that moment, he was.

How can we learn to live with that kind of trust? How can we live fully in each moment, when everything around us tells us to live in fear because disasters are lurking around every corner? And what does living fully in each moment have to do with our call to be the Body of Christ, broken and poured out for the healing of the world?

One way to answer these questions is to do something that seems – like walking on water – to be impossible. One impossible journey gave me some clues in that direction, a

momentary experience of living in the realm of God.

Some of you may remember that a number of years ago, Carolyn Shields started the Seekers bike team by inviting some folks to join her on the AIDS Ride. For three successive summers, a shifting group of Seekers and their friends raised over \$2000 each to benefit the Whitman-Walker Clinic, Food and Friends, and medical research to combat the HIV/AIDS virus. Each year Team Seekers joined about two thousand other people on their bicycles, starting out from Raleigh, North Carolina and covering the 330 miles to Washington, DC over the course of four days.

Cyclists trained together and separately for many weeks, riding hundreds of miles up and down the hills around Poolesville, out the W&OD trail to Purcellville, and anyplace else they could think of to make 50, 60, 70-mile and longer rides interesting. Towards the end of June in each of those years, Team Seekers rode together triumphantly onto the Mall in the blazing sun, having learned important lessons about perseverance, about caring for one another, and about the astonishing spirit of generosity and compassion that permeated that event.

One of the most important lessons I learned was to stay in the moment. I especially remember one rider saying that what gave her courage to continue when she would begin to get tired, to become afraid, to lose heart at the seemingly endless, lonely miles ahead. Whatever may happen in the next mile or two or twenty, she would say to herself, is in the future. In this present moment, I am ok. And she would go on.

In this present moment, I am ok.

Too often, though, I forget where I am, as I rush to get to whatever comes next.

When I was seven or eight years old, my parents insisted that I take piano lessons. My sister, who is four years older than I, had begun her studies much earlier. She was a gifted student, and by the time I started, she was already playing quite complex pieces. Every day after school, I would do my homework while my sister practiced. Chopin waltzes, the Liszt Transcendentals, and Mendelssohn piano concertos were the background music of my schoolgirl afternoons.

When my sister was finished, it was my turn to sit at the keyboard of our beautiful, oiled walnut baby grand. Often, as I struggled to master the simple beginner pieces I had been set, my father would get home from work. From time to time, he would stop me and have me repeat a phrase over and over until I could play it without a mistake. As an impatient child who did not quite get the purpose of practice, I just wanted to escape. Sometimes, I got to do just that – sometimes my dad would get out his violin to show me how to phrase a passage, and then, carried away by the music, go on to play the whole piece, and another, and another, until it was time for dinner and my practice schedule long forgotten.

But more often, as I rushed through yet another boring repetition of scales and arpeggios, or that simplified version of Für Elise, I would hear my father admonish, “Don’t anticipate.”

Don't anticipate. As a child, I don't think that I quite understood what he meant by that. Mostly, I thought he was saying that I was playing too fast. What I realize, now, is that he was telling me to stay in rhythm, to attend to the beat, and, most especially, to give every note AND every rest its full measure. Do not play the next note until you have fully played this one. Do not start up again until the rest is really over. Stay in the present moment.

In this present moment, I am ok.

As the Gospel lesson suggests, staying in the moment, like long-distance bike riding, playing the piano or walking on water, is not something that we can master all at once, but rather is a matter of training and practice. In a momentary burst of enthusiasm, Peter was able to set aside his everyday, common sense knowledge and walk on the waves like Jesus just for a moment or two. But soon, he reverted to his habitual understanding of the way the world works, and began to sink. So Jesus calmly reached out his hand, caught him, and took him safely back to the boat, only teasing him a little for his loss of faith. I like to imagine that Peter tried again later, and was able to take a few more steps before he started to sink.

All of us are like that – we learn by fits and starts, seeing a new truth and vowing to live by it, only to forget what we have learned and go back to our familiar habits over and over again.

In her book *To Pray and to Love*, the noted church historian and author of books on spiritual life, Roberta Bondi, recounts a story in which one of the fourth century Desert Fathers is asked for help by a disciple. Bondi suggests that the student was probably discouraged by the small amount of progress he was making. So Abba Ammonas said "I have spent fourteen years . . . asking God night and day to grant me the victory over anger."

Bondi tells us that the Abba's followers would have understood this confession of their teacher's ongoing struggle

as encouragement as they struggled with their own anger or anything else in themselves with which they persistently struggled, for discouragement over the slowness of Christian growth was a major problem for disciples then as it is for us today. So the disciple heard, "If the abba is still struggling after all these years, why should I be discouraged? This is no more than I should expect in the life I have chosen." [Roberta C. Bondi. *To Pray and to Love* (Kindle Locations 295-301). Kindle Edition]

In this present moment, I am ok.

I'm ok, but what about the rest of the world? What right have I to be ok when there is so much pain and suffering all around me?

A few weeks ago, I went to hear the Dalai Lama talk about world peace. Actually, he didn't talk exactly about world

peace, even though the big sign said "World Peace Talk." What he actually talked about was inner peace, because, as he said, only through inner peace will we ever have peace in the world. And inner peace is found through staying in the present moment. Worry, fear in anticipation of bad things to come, he told the gathered throngs, was pointless. "If you have fear of some pain or suffering," he said, "you should examine whether there is anything you can do about it. If you can, there is no need to worry about it; if you cannot do anything, then there is also no need to worry."

In this present moment, I am ok.

But what about those moments when I am definitely not ok? What about those moments when I am in physical pain, in grief, in sorrow? What about the catastrophes that have already happened, not just to me, but those whom I love? What about all the broken places in the world? How dare I have inner peace when there is so much pain and suffering all around me?

Like a lot of things the Dalai Lama says, his advice about worry sounds a little like cheap grace. If it were that easy to have inner peace, we'd all be blissed out all of the time.

But, as was said of Jesus, the Dalai Lama speaks with both authority and compassion. He knows that many who hear him must work every day at unfulfilling jobs to feed, or deal with the reality of having no job at all, struggling to clothe their families, to pay for medical care and housing, to just get by in situations that lack any sense of beauty, grace, or comfort. In full knowledge of the great pain and loss he has

suffered in his own life, as well as the very real suffering of others, the Dalai Lama's teachings are a reminder that, no matter how dire the circumstances, we can choose how we respond. We can flail in fear against the rising waves, or – following the example of Jesus – we can walk on the water and reach out our hand to those who are sinking.

And that, of course, is the crucial connection between our own inner peace and the healing of the world. We cannot bring about world peace when we, ourselves, are angry and anxious. We cannot save anyone else from drowning when we, ourselves, are sinking with fear.

So, listen. Do you hear Jesus calling to us over the waves? Let us practice walking on water together, now, in this present moment.