

"Stepping Forward"

Years ago I tried to teach our then five year-old daughter to float on her back. She was quite willing to have me support her, but when I tried to get her to relax enough to let the water support her, she could not do it. She tensed up so badly that the water didn't have a chance. She could not trust the water, she could not let her body give the water something to support.

The experience reminded me of my attempts to trust God. I believe that God is right here with us, no matter where we are, and that God loves me, and that God is able to do anything. But all too often my nights are filled with anxiety over situations and decisions. Thoughts of Ebola and the extremist terrorist group Isis and concern over children and animals being left in hot cars and otherwise mistreated; worries about the economy and so many folks I know who do not have enough money to live on. Concern about our Winsted church, and whether we will be able to swing a roof, and if we do, how long we will be able to pay our bills after that. More generally, how can we keep the folks we love healthy and safe? How can we guarantee our own futures?

The powerful communication technologies of our day blast us with enough upsetting news to make a person want to hibernate forever. Life is scary, filled with reports of security breaches, illness, accident, drug abuse, and "mean guys." So we swim through life, trying to trust the water, trying not to drown in the swiftness of its currents and the chaotic pollution all around us. And the basic question of our lives hits hard from time to time: Can we trust God?

'Way back in 1650, Oliver Cromwell sent his famous message to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He urged them to review their faith in God, and pointed to Chapter 28 of the Book of Isaiah. He wanted them to realize the futility of "little religion" or "small faith." In that chapter, Isaiah uses a colorful illustration to challenge his the limited faith of his hearers: "The bed you have made is far too short to lie on; and the blankets are too narrow to cover you." (Is. 28:20)

I love this image of skimpy faith. If you have ever spent a restless night on a short, uncomfortable bed or tried to make it through a chilly night with inadequate covers, you know how well Isaiah used this illustration. Isaiah said that this is the way of people whose faith is too small: they are cold, restless, dissatisfied. Isaiah saw these qualities in his people, as they had showy religion with no real substance, no true commitment to serving God. They considered themselves all right when the weather was warm; but when it got cold, they had no adequate covering, no deep relationship with the God who could help them.

Now here's a story you'll enjoy:

Years ago, a woman wrote to her husband, who was in prison for armed robbery, asking him, "When is the best time to plant the potatoes?" He wrote back: "Don't dig in the garden. That's where I hid my guns."

As happens in prison, all the mail going in and out of the prison was censored. When the guards read that sentence, they sent out a group of men who dug up the garden from one end to the other, but didn't find even one gun. When the wife reported what they had done, her husband replied, "That's great! Now the garden is ready. *Now* is the time to plant the potatoes!"

This story was told by the late Clarence Cranford, Washington, DC Baptist preacher, to illustrate how we often need help in our lives and with our faith. Seed cannot be planted in hard ground. The ground must be broken up so that the seed can be inserted into the soil, and so that water can penetrate to the seed and later to the roots. In other words, we cannot prepare the garden alone. We are not strong enough to push a plow. Something has to pull it. We must be willing to let the transforming power of God pull our stubborn wills toward repentance and faith." (Clarence Cranford, *Cups of Light*) Faith is knowing that we need God, and stepping out in the belief that God's promises of help are trustworthy.

The scriptures read today speak to this. The people of Israel were caught between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea (Sea of Reeds). They panicked. Moses tried to calm their fears. "Stand firm," he said, "and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today." But God wasn't satisfied with that advice. He wanted more. "Tell the people of Israel to *go forward*," God said. Only when they demonstrated their faith by stepping forward was God's plan for their deliverance revealed to them.

In the gospel lesson, the disciples had just witnessed the feeding of the multitude, where they saw that their limited resources could be sufficient when used in faith. After the feeding, Jesus told them to get in their boat to go to the other side of the lake while Jesus remained there alone, to pray.

Keep in mind that the image of rough seas is a rich one in the Hebrew scriptures. In the beginning, God brought forth form out of the watery chaos. In the lesson from Exodus today, the Israelites faced what they thought would end up being a watery grave at the Red Sea. But God showed remarkable power in separating the sea - controlling chaos - and allowed the Israelites to cross over on dry ground while the Egyptians drowned. In the Hebrew scriptures, God is pictured frequently as one who walks upon the water (Job 9:8; Job 38:16; Ps. 77:19) - one who overcomes and controls chaos.

So there were the disciples, out in the water, being "beaten by the waves." They were terrified. Then suddenly Jesus came to them, walking on the sea, giving them his presence: "Take heart, it is I." Walking on the water, Jesus was the one who could overcome the chaos of the waters... Peter needed proof: "Lord, if it is really you, bid me come out on the water with you." Jesus did.

So Peter stepped out into the water and sank when his faith fell apart. Peter had little faith, and lots of fear; but the fact that he stepped out shows that he had more faith than the other disciples on the boat! It is often said of Peter that he was a disciple of "firsts." He was the first disciple to declare Jesus the Messiah, he was the first to try to walk on the water, and he was the first disciple to SINK!

Both of today's scriptures show fearful people and the sufficiency of God's power to deliver them from the situations threatening to undo them. Even more, the larger message of the Bible is that **God chose**, with both the Hebrew people and with the disciples who were so low on faith, to *keep working* with folks who constantly failed in their attempts to put their faith in God.

Human faith may be insufficient, but God's mercy, love, and commitment are sufficient! Today's

scriptures affirm that just as in the beginning God overcame the waters of chaos to bring forth creation, so God was able to deliver the Hebrews out of the hands of the Egyptians and the disciples out of the peril of the raging sea. The same God is able to deliver us out of the chaos of our fears and failings. (Pause)

The morning arrives, it's time to get up. But there's that familiar weight in your chest, the catch in your breathing as the storm of all the things that are wrong or that could go wrong assaults you. How can I make it through this day? How can I deal with all the issues and disappointments and stresses and expectations and things I have no power to change?

And God whispers: "Step forward, take my hand. I am with you; you do not face anything alone. Keep your eyes on Me and you will learn anew of my power, my presence and my love for you."

From "Crossings" - from Guideposts, May 1986:

I came to the swift, raging river,
And the roar held the echo of fear;
"Oh Lord, give me wings to fly over,
If you are, as you promised, quite near."

But God said, "Trust the grace I am giving,
All-pervasive, sufficient for you,
Take my hand - we will face this together;
But my plan is - not over, but through." - Lee Webber

"Tell the people to go forward." Step out in faith *before* you see the proof of God's presence and love. By this, you give God your unique gift: your trust and your love; by this your life will be filled with blessing. May it be so. Amen.

Let us pray.

O God, sometimes we feel so pressed in life, so unsure of your presence with us. We cannot be good people without your help. We cannot run this church without your leadership. We cannot manage our lives apart from your strength and guidance. Show us how to step forward to give you our gifts of faith. Lift us up where we have stumbled, forgive us where we have turned away, renew our hearts, O God, and help us trust you as our shelter, our Rescuer, our Help in the midst of every storm. May we honor you with our steps, our deeds, and our love. Amen.