

**AUGUST 21, 2016**

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**MATTHEW 14: 22-34**

**“WALKING ON WATER”**

If you're interested in baseball history, you know that the Oakland A's used to be the Kansas City A's. And back before then, going way back, they were the Philadelphia A's. And the farther back in time you go, they were usually called the Athletics, A's just being an abbreviation for their real name.

Anyway, the most famous manager of the old Philadelphia Athletics was the great Connie Mack. In fact, he is one of the most famous managers anywhere in baseball history. He usually had good seasons, but not always. Even great managers sometimes have lousy seasons---because how good a team is does depend on the players, too!

In 1916, the Athletics, and Mack, had a horrible season. The season ended for them with a record of 36 wins and 117 losses, one of the worst season records for any team ever. On the last day of the season, after their last game (which they, of course, lost), a sports reporter asked Connie Mack for his thoughts about the 1916 season. Mack replied simply, thinking back on 36 wins and 117 losses---“Well, you can't win them all.” (“The Last Word”, George Will, *Newsweek*, 8/16/99, p. 22)

No, you can't win them all. And sometimes you can't win hardly any!

We all have times like the 1916 Athletics season. Days, months, maybe even years when things are tough.

So did Jesus' disciples. It wasn't always easy-going for them, either. In our gospel reading today from Matthew 14, we heard about when they had a real rough night.

Here's a recap of what we just heard read-----Jesus and the disciples were together on one side of the Sea of Galilee as evening came. The Lord told the Twelve to take the fishing boat across the Sea to the other side because He was going to stay back by Himself to pray. As they sailed at night, the weather changed from good to bad. The Sea of Galilee is known for sudden storms---all of a sudden the weather turns bad and a storm descends quickly. Not good if you're out at night in a not very big fishing boat!

The disciples were having a very tough time out in the middle of the big lake. The storm winds were pushing hard in the wrong direction. The waves became huge. It looked likely that their boat would go under.

And then one of the most famous miracles of our Lord took place. Jesus meets them out in the middle of the lake, walking on the water. As we read in Matthew 14:25----“and in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the water.” They were alone in their little boat, in great danger. And He walked out to them in the middle of a storm. He didn't have a boat to go out to them in. And He certainly wasn't swimming. It was a great miracle---He just walked out to them on the surface of the storm-tossed lake.

And the first thing He does when they see Him drawing close is to comfort them----in

verse 27 He said to them, “Take heart, it is I. Have no fear.” And then He makes the storm to cease and all is well. But before He calms the storm there took place a famous episode with St. Peter. And that is what I will focus on today.....

The storm was still raging as the Lord drew near the boat. And St. Peter decides that he wishes to take a very big step of faith---he wants to walk on water, too. And so he says to Christ in verse 28---“Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” And the Lord replies with a very simple one-word answer in verse 29---“Come.”

So Peter took a big step of faith. He climbs out of the boat and takes a step right on to the lake surface....and starts walking. The Lord was performing another miracle---He made it possible for Peter to walk on water, too!

He did fine at first---with great faith he walked towards Jesus. How long this continued we don’t know, but it’s interesting to speculate---was it just for a moment, or 5 minutes, or 10 minutes? We have no idea. But it started soon to all become too much for Peter. Remember, Jesus hadn’t stilled the storm yet. It was raging all around. And St. Peter’s faith started to become fear-----and then down he went.

I think we can all identify with the Apostle. We try, as Christians, to live by faith in Jesus Christ. With God’s help, we try to live for God. But, sometimes, the storms of life get very strong. And like with Peter, our faith starts to turn into fear. And we start sinking.

Sometimes it seems like life throws more at us than we can handle.....Lyndon Baines Johnson was president when American involvement in the Vietnam War became very heavy. He was horribly stressed out by all the decisions he had to make and nothing seemed to go very well. On one particularly rough day, LBJ said, “I feel like a hitchhiker caught in a bad hailstorm on a Texas highway. I can’t run. I can’t hide. And I can’t make it stop hailing.” (Vietnam: A History, Stanley Karnow, Penguin, 1989, p. 396)

That’s what it was like for Peter---no way to get out of the storm and no way to stop it. Faith turned to fear and down he started to go.

And sometimes it’s like that for us. We are doing our best to live for God and serve Him and obey Him. You might say we’re walking along on water by God’s grace. And then the storms roll in. You lose your job. Or you get seriously ill....or someone in your family does. You fall into some new sin or maybe that old bad habit or addiction springs back up in your life. Maybe your child heads in a bad direction and won’t listen to you. Etc., etc..... In the storm, your faith begins to change into fear. And you begin to go down.

So what to do? Do what St. Peter did when it happened to him. Sometimes we tend to chuckle at St. Peter, thinking that he always seemed to be getting himself into trouble, that he was too impulsive, etc. Maybe---but when it came to the crunch, when he was about to drown, St. Peter did exactly the right thing. As we read in verse 30---“when he saw the wind, he was afraid; and beginning to sin, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”

Now if Jesus wasn’t who Jesus is, He could have responded like this to Peter---“Save you? I did a miracle to let you walk on water and then you got scared. Now you’re on your own---start swimming!” But, of course, He didn’t respond like that. After Peter cried out for help we read how the Lord responded in verse 31---“Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him.” Peter cried out for help. Christ helped him. He reached out His hand to Peter and rescued him.

So if we are doing well in life---just “walking along on the water”, living by faith in Christ, serving Him, obeying Him---and then everything goes wrong and we start to sink..... We should do just what St. Peter did---call out to the Lord, “save me!” And He will. He won’t abandon you. He will pull you out of the water.

When walking on the water isn’t working anymore, when your faith turns into fear, and it looks like you might drown, don’t despair. Like Peter, call for help from the Lord. He will help you.

And you may very well end up closer to the Lord than you did before you started to sink. You very well may end up better off spiritually *after* the near drowning than you were *before* it.

There was a man who was the only survivor of a shipwreck far out at sea. He managed to stay alive by floating for days on a piece of wreckage and then being washed up on the shore of an uninhabited island. It wasn’t much of an island---almost no trees, a few animals to hunt for food, and he could do some fishing. Somehow, he managed to scrape up enough food to stay alive. It rained a lot there, so he gathered some driftwood and built himself a tiny, primitive hut. It was all he had, but it was a big deal to him as he at least had a dry place to sleep. One day, after cooking a fish over a little campfire near his hut he went walking around the island to try and hunt some little animal down to eat for lunch. While he was gone, a strong wind came up and sparks from his little fire (which he hadn’t put out) blew onto his hut and it caught on fire. When he got back from his hunting, it was way too late. The hut was almost totally burned up and there was a big column of smoke going up into the sky. The poor fellow fell into total despair. He fell on the ground and cried out, “Why, God? Why, God? Why did you allow the fire? Help me!”

Some hours later he saw a ship sailing up near to his island and a little landing boat coming from the ship to the shore. Someone had come to rescue him! With great joy, he climbed into the boat and asked them, “How in the world did you find me out here in the middle of nowhere?” “Oh, you were easy to find. Our sailing route was quite a long ways from this little island, but then we saw earlier today the signal you made—and we changed course to investigate. And here we are! But we must compliment you---how clever that was of you to start that fire and send up that very visible smoke signal! We could see it from many miles away. What a great idea!” (in “Great Stories”, Vol. 5, Oct-Dec., 1998, p. 6)

Was the fire a disaster? Sure seemed like it at the time! But the disaster is what got him rescued. He was sure far better off after the fire than before the fire!

It could be similar for you. You may be having a fairly smooth time of it right now---I hope so! But some of you (and all of us at some time or another) are having a rough time. You may feel like St. Peter---sinking fast! Problems, illnesses, your sins, stress, etc---your faith seems to be changing into fear. And you’re starting to go under the waves. But maybe this disaster can end up helping you like the fire helped the man on the island.

If problems cause you to cry out with your whole heart and your whole life to Jesus Christ and say to Him---“Save me!”: then your problems could be what end up bringing you closer to Christ than before. Like the man on the island, like St. Peter out on the lake---disaster will lead to rescue by the Lord if you reach out to Him. And if after He takes your hand, like He took Peter’s hand...if you keep holding *tightly* to His hand after that, you will be better off than before you started sinking.

Jesus will rescue you like He rescued Peter. When the storms come, when all seems hopeless, He will be reaching out to you. Grab on to His hand and let Him rescue you. You will then be safe in the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ.