

Sermon

You know this scene - Coyote is right on the heels of the roadrunner. He's really going to catch that bird this time. All of a sudden, Roadrunner puts on an extra burst of speed, kicking up thick dust all around them. When the dust clears - we see Coyote - who has run off a cliff - somehow defying gravity as he makes his way through the air. Until he realizes where he is. He looks at the audience, and then down, and back at us - before falling deep into the canyon.

And every time, I wonder - would he have made it if he had just resisted the urge to look down?

All week I have been picturing Peter like the Coyote - breaking the 4th wall as he looks out at us, the readers - and his eyes getting huge before he begins to sink.

But let's back up for the full context of this story. We begin with the first of three "immediately's" in this short story. Immediately, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead of him while he dismissed the crowds and went up onto a mountain alone to pray. This immediately is what follows the story we heard a couple weeks ago where Jesus and the disciples fed more than 5000 people who had gathered to hear him preach. So after this huge outpouring of time and energy - Jesus pulls away to pray and renew - and has the disciples get away from it all as well.

In the dark of the early morning - and with waves and wind battering them, the disciples see what they assume to be a ghost, walking toward them on the water. And they are completely freaked out - they're terrified and they cry out.

Immediately - this is our second one - immediately after they cry out in fear, Jesus responds. Don't be afraid, he says. It's me, Jesus. Two Sundays in a row we have gotten this reassurance from Jesus: Don't be afraid.

Easier said than done, I am sure - when you see someone walking on water - is it more reassuring or less that it's Jesus and not a ghost?

Either way - Peter decides to test the water, so to speak. Lord - if it's really you - command me to come out onto the water, he exclaims. What is he thinking? Is he trying to prove himself? Does he think that Jesus will tell him to stay in the boat? Or that if it's not Jesus he'll be able to tell somehow? Can Peter even swim?

It is not a well thought through request. It seems important to recognize that Peter is who initiates all of this - not Jesus. Jesus doesn't say - if you believe in me - put your life at risk by trying to do something only I can do. But, at Peter's request, he does tell Peter to come.

And for a moment - Peter does. He gets out of the boat and moves toward Jesus. Until he realizes that the wind is blowing hard and the waves are high. And then he begins to sink. And in his desperation and fear - he cries out: Lord rescue me!

Here's the third immediately of the passage. Immediately after Peter calls out, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him. He was right there. Close enough to immediately pull him up.

And I think Jesus' tone of voice matters a lot in how we hear this story - most of us were taught that Jesus is chastising Peter - Geez Peter, your faith is so small - why did you sink?

But what if this is not a failure of faith - afterall, when Peter got in over his head - he calls out to Jesus - not to his friends in the boat - he calls to Jesus - which seems pretty faithful to me. And Jesus is right there.

So what if we hear Jesus' voice more like that of a parent who is helping their child learn to walk - and of course they take a step and immediately fall down? Peter - you have a little faith - and room to grow.

I think I have only ever heard this story told as Peter failing - but what if this is just the way faith works? We have times when we get in over our heads and need help. And I worry about framing needing help as a failure.

What if the big message of this story is not that Peter failed - or that he was dumb so he needed help - because of course he needed help - we all need help. Of course he got scared - we all get scared; of course he second guessed - we all do. What if the big message is that when those normal, natural things happened, Jesus was RIGHT THERE.

Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. The scripture doesn't say Jesus ran to him or dove towards him - Jesus simply reached out his hand, because he was right there.

It's possible that you feel like you are failing at faith right now. Or that you have at some point. Possible that you are afraid of failing so you don't want to try something new. Or that you don't want to ask for help because it will make you feel like a failure.

Take heart, Jesus says - to his disciples then - and you disciples now. Take heart - don't be afraid. Karoline Lewis suggests that Jesus is really saying: "You are going to have to lead, live, and love with your heart, Peter. You know who I am. Deep down in your heart, you know me and you know I will be there. Trust yourself. Trust your heart. Jesus' words call Peter back to himself — to his truth, to his heart, to his faith."

Take heart, family of faith - no matter our wandering, Jesus is right here. Blessing us with rescue, with grace.

One last thing - at the end of this story. Peter and the disciples are all closer to Jesus - not further away. They recognize that Jesus is the Christ, maybe for the first time they see him truly as the Son of God and they worship him. This "failure" on the part of Peter, brings everyone involved into a fuller relationship with one another and with God. I kinda hope

we all go out this week and fail in ways big enough that they help others move closer to Christ! Let's make it so.

Amen