

Lord, Save Me

“Mom,” says Phoebe, my 12-year old daughter, as we are getting in the car. “Mom, I feel worried. I don’t think we were socially-distancing enough,” she says. We are loading up in the car after an afternoon at my friend’s farm. She teaches horseback-riding lessons to my daughter, who is now fully-immersed in her “horse girl” identity. We spend a lot of time at this farm, mostly because of Phoebe’s lessons, but also because I truly enjoy seeing and spending time with my friend Jessica, the owner and teacher at the farm. We had been invited to a safe, socially-distanced outdoor get-together, and had spent the afternoon there. Phoebe helped some of the younger children take turns walking around with a horse.

I, on the other hand, was exhausted, physically and emotionally. I had maybe 3 hours of sleep the night before, and the toll that this year has taken on me, on everyone, on all of us, caught up to me that day. I wasn’t in the right state of mind to really take in and understand what Phoebe was saying to me. I am embarrassed to admit this, but I immediately interpreted it as my tween’s criticism of my parenting skills--and in my defense, she does this often, if you have a daughter you know what I’m talking about--and not what it actually was, which was my young child expressing anxiety over doing something we haven’t done in over a year--attended a get together. She was looking for reassurance that we had remained safe, which we had, that we took proper precautions to not get sick or get others sick, which we had. She was looking for her mama to tell her “It’s okay, don’t worry, I made sure we were safe.” After all, that is my job, to keep her safe and make her feel safe. Because I was so tired and weary, I didn’t hear her the way she needed me to hear her.

When Pastor Doug called me almost two weeks ago to see if I would preach this weekend, I’ll be honest, my first reaction was recoil and instant distress. Funny as it may seem, I do not at all

enjoy speaking in public. Singing and performing, no problem. Speaking to a crowd my own thoughts and words, no thank you and have a nice day. But when the leader you have worked so well with for so many years--I am beginning my 9th year serving here at Divinity--asks you to do something, you do it. That's how I was raised--you help out when you are needed by the people you love. I love Pastor Doug, and I love this congregation.

When I looked at what passage was in the lectionary for this week, it was like a gift straight from God. This passage of Jesus calling Peter on the water has always spoken deeply to me. For me, it's one of those passages I recall in times of stress, anxiety, uncertainty. There's always something new that reaches out to me from the text.

So, being a person who has suffered a lifetime of anxiety, this passage speaks to me about self-care and focus.

At the beginning of this passage, Jesus had just fed a crowd of 5,000. He reached out, taught, and healed people in this crowd. This crowd isn't different from the kind of crowd we would see nowadays--some people in need of healing and their caregivers, "fans," for lack a better word, and just curious individuals eager to get a glimpse of this Jesus guy. At the time the crowd arrived, Jesus had already been hoping for some time alone to mourn the passing of John the Baptist, and as Mark talked about last week, he saw this crowd, and had compassion on them. How many times have we been too tired, too sad, too depressed, but we saw there was a need and acted anyway? This is a Christ-like thing to do. That's not the end of the story though. Jesus doesn't abandon his need for self-care and time to himself to reflect and pray. He dismisses the crowds, and he also dismisses the disciples, telling them to take the boat out on to the water so they too can rest. Jesus is taking the time he needs. Jesus hikes up the mountainside--a little bit of exercise--and stays there a while to rest and pray. The passage

doesn't say much more about Jesus' time up the mountain, but we can all imagine; that he sat in the shade somewhere, had a cathartic cry about the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, maybe found a stream that fed the Sea of Galilee, listened to the birds singing, the air moving the leaves, the feeling of the breeze on his human skin. Later that evening, he looks out to the sea, only to find the boat has drifted away offshore, and decides to hang around a little longer, and spends the night on the mountain.

Is it possible the disciples were worried about the strong winds that pushed them out into the sea? That they were scared about a storm arising? The sea of Galilee is known for its violent storms. Much like our favorite lake, Lake Erie, because it is small, shallow, and low to sea level, violent storms can spring up quickly. Jesus does not run to help them. Maybe he knows they'll be just fine, and he needs more rest, which is what he ultimately does. Anyone with children and/or pets has been here. You're trying to nap for, good grief, 20 minutes, you hear some commotion, you listen intently and then think, 'eh, nobody's screaming, they can handle this one on their own.' Ultimately, Jesus takes the time he needs to restore his energy, his emotions, his mindset.

Early the next morning, Jesus seems to be feeling more energetic, and comes strutting out to the boat, still in the middle of the sea, right on top of the water, like it's nothing. I like to imagine him kinda cheeky and confident, "Good morning, boys!" (This is fun to do with youth that are exhausted on a youth trip, they think it's really funny.)

The disciples, probably in a sleepy fog, start freaking out, rubbing their tired eyes in disbelief, "Woah, what is happening, I've never seen a human walk on top of the water, what's going on, this can't be real..." They conclude, understandably to me, that this is a ghost.

Jesus sees the disciples flipping out, and says, “Take heart, don’t be afraid, it’s me.” Kind of a “Chill out, guys, it’s just me, you know me.” Peter then speaks up. He almost challenges Jesus--“if that’s really you, then let me come out with you.” In our translation, Jesus simply replies, “Come.” In other translations, the qualifying phrase, ‘if you must,’ is added as well. Like a parent again, “alright fine, if you really have to.”

So Peter exits the boat, gets out on the water, and walks towards Jesus. I imagine he’s thinking to himself, ‘this is pretty cool’ and goes from that, to ‘this is impossible, oh my goodness the wind is so strong, I am going to sink, I can’t handle it, oh no.’ He cries out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reaches down to him and says “Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

This is the part of the story that speaks to me the most. There have been many times in my life that I have felt scared, lost, like I was drowning. In this year, 2020, where so many things are scary, frightening, uncertain, and hard to understand, I think speaks to a lot of us. There is just TOO MUCH right now. The COVID pandemic, sending kids to school--should we or shouldn’t we, a severely dysfunctional government, fires, hurricanes, murder hornets, dust clouds, economic collapse, sickness, depression, unemployment, food insecurity, climate change, police brutality, anarchists, white supremacists, the constant arguing about these issues--where they come from and how to handle them, and the list goes on and on and on and on. It is seemingly never-ending this year. These dangers seem to be swirling in a whirlwind all around us. We feel ourselves sinking in the wind of doubt, feel the waves coming up over our eyes, clouding our judgment and our outlook. We cry, “Lord, Save Me!”

What does Jesus do next? He doesn’t talk first. He doesn’t ask questions. He doesn’t question our intentions, or our heart. He first reaches out to us. You find this all over the gospel. Jesus

reaches out TO US. Every single time. He is always extending his hand, always reaching towards us, always ready to recenter us.

Why did Peter doubt? Why do we doubt? Because he lost his focus on Jesus, just as we lose focus. We lose our focus on Jesus, on love, on God's light in our lives. When our "fight, flight, or freeze" impulses kick in, it is hard to keep our focus. When we hear daily death totals day in and day out, we lose focus. When we hear of our elected officials doing nothing but dividing the very public they are tasked to serve, we lose focus. When we hear about devastation from explosions in Lebanon, hurricanes in North Carolina, fires in the Arctic, we lose focus. When we ourselves get sick, not just from COVID, but also the many other ailments in the world that still very much exist, when we learn our Pastor is fighting for his life, when a beloved choir member suddenly passes away, we lose focus.

Jesus knew that when he asked Peter why he was doubting. Peter's doubt doesn't change anything--Jesus STILL reaches out to pull Peter back up. Jesus himself did THIS VERY THING one day previous. He was tired and mourning, and he took time to care for himself, and recenter, and refocus. Notice how adeptly he refocuses his disciples.

This reading reminds us that it's actually okay to doubt. It's okay to be overcome by our current circumstances. This reading teaches us that when we do lose focus, we can regain our focus on Christ, that Jesus is right there, ready to reach out and pull us out of the water. How? Clearly, this passage is suggesting self-care.

Self-care, according to Google, is the practice of taking an active role in protecting one's own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress. I would take that further and say not just during periods of stress, but self-care is important as a healthy routine practice.

Self-care can look like a lot of things. Doing what you enjoy, crafting, wood-working, cooking and baking, using your hands to make something. Writing, drawing, and making music. It can look like any form of exercise. It can include meditating and praying, setting aside daily time for devotion. It can include reading or learning something new. It can include just simply sitting in a quiet space, being present and seeing the wonder of creation all around you.

It is important to note that directly after this passage, Jesus and the disciples go on to perform a lot more healings, being so focused that the crowds that came to see them were healed simply by touching the hem of his garment. In the picture you are looking at, taken in Finland of the northern lights, is a phenomena called "The Hem of His Garment." God's reminders of God's presence in our life are everywhere, quietly reminding us to stop, be present, notice, and stay focused. The northern lights, robin's eggs and the promise of new life, fireflies with their bioluminescence, a bald eagle flying through the clouds, black-eyed Susans that take all summer to grow, and then one morning, BAM, there they are.

With my daughter Phoebe, I was so tired and unfocused that I was not the best version of myself. I did not supply my daughter with what she needed in that moment. Lucky for me, she is forgiving, and so is God. I took time to rest, think, and refocus. I learned, and hopefully, will grow as a parent. God is always reaching to us, as Jesus did with Peter, to regain our footing and our focus, so we can go on to be God's light in the world, the circle continuing.

Please pray with me.

Most Heavenly God, we are tired. We are discouraged, we are anxious, we are weary. There are so many uncertain issues in our lives. Help us to remember that you want us to take time, to care for ourselves, to be present and refocus on you. Remind us that taking time to care for

ourselves allows us to care for others the way you would intend. Lead us through this time of endless questions, changing policies, and new ways of interacting. Take our hand when we cry, "Lord, save me," and help us remember that you always will.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen