

WANDERING HEART: FIGURING OUT FAITH WITH PETER¹

Psalm 19 (selected verses) ~ Matthew 16:13-20

Praise the Mount

Third Sunday in Lent ~ March 3, 2024

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Introduction to Scripture:

Have you ever heard of “sea bands?” They are an amazingly simple and clever device you put on both wrists to prevent sea sickness. Also known as motion sickness. These bands have a small plastic sphere that applies gentle pressure on each wrist that mystically steadies and calms the stomachs of those who are prone to motion sickness. I am one of those people. I do not find amusement parks particularly amusing. Nor do boat rides in rough waters, or plane rides in choppy air bring me joy. My dear mother-in-law, Fran, kindly gifted me with this set of sea-bands soon after I married into the boat-loving Davis family over forty years ago.

I was thinking we might need to start distributing sea bands with our bulletins this Lent as we hang with Simon Peter through all his topsy turvy ups and downs. Peter definitely has mood swings. Big ones. It’s hard to diagnose over two thousand years later, but just maybe Peter had bipolar disorder. You may recall in last week’s story from Matthew 14, we stepped out of the boat with him, then quickly started to sink with him until he cried out, “Jesus, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand, and caught him, saying “You, of little faith.” Now today, in Matthew 16, we get to see, “Mr. Little Faith” morph into “You of Big Faith!” Today we read about a big faith moment between Peter and Jesus. Same guy, different day. Put on those sea bands, folks. Let us listen now to the story of the day that Peter gets it right, from the Gospel According to Matthew, chapter 16, verses 13-20.

Communion Meditation:

What was it? Maybe the *two* miraculous feedings. At this point in our gospel story, Jesus had fed not only one crowd of over five thousand one day with marvelously multiplying loaves and fish; but then did it a *second* time with seven loaves and a few fish, this time feeding four thousand men, plus the women and children. Pretty amazing. Or maybe it was the open water one-handed rescue, for Peter, that made Jesus’ power and identity up close and personal. We will never know what it was, that clicked in Peter’s mind and heart that day in Caesarea Philippi. So that when Jesus asked his disciples point blank: “But who do you say that I am?” Peter quickly blurted out loud and clear, “You are the one!! You are the Real Deal, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God we have all been waiting for.”

We can’t know why Peter said this at that point. But we *do* know that Peter got the answer right. 100%, A+, “Go to the head of the class” right. So right, that Jesus immediately officially renamed him and affirmed him. On the basis of this breakthrough moment as Matthew’s gospel records it, the Roman Catholic church would identify Peter as the first Pope. We will get to that in a moment. Right now, let’s stay with that breakthrough moment where Peter saw Jesus for who he really was. And a moment when Jesus affirmed Peter for being way

more than Peter imagined himself to be. Giving him keys to the kingdom! No written driver's ed test, no hours of instruction and practice behind the wheel, but here you go: the keys!

Today, over two thousand years later, Jesus' response to Peter should boost our confidence, as well. Here's why: Think about it: if Jesus chose to build his church on bipolar, shoot from the hip, fly off the handle, jump out of the boat, "Mr. No-filter," Peter. Then is there hope for what God can do with us too? Yes? Like Peter, we all go through ups and downs, periods of doubt and despair. We mess up in small ways and big ways. Yet, God still believes in us. Jesus is still handing us the keys. Not because we can recite a creed. Nor because we have this faith thing all figured out. We will see that Peter definitely didn't.

Jesus' decision to rename *Simon bar Jonah*, Peter, contains a great irony that helps us too. Jesus literally said: *You are petros [a stone] and on this petra [rock] I will build my church.* *Petros* was not a name. It would be like saying, "You are Stone." Yes, unstable, unpredictable, changeable Simon, Jesus is calling the rock! As I mentioned earlier, based on this very text, Peter was identified as the first bishop of Rome in Roman Catholic tradition, thereby making him the first pope (although the title was not officially used until almost two hundred years later). Reformers, like we Presbyterians, in reaction to this understand "the rock" to be Peter's faith—something shared by all Christians. Whether he meant Peter, the man, or Peter's faith, we will never know. But either way, the takeaway for us today is the same: Trust those breakthrough "mountaintop" moments of clarity and revelation. Those moments that don't come every day, but they can feed us and propel us forward on our faith journey.

We see them throughout our Bible: Like Jesus' seeing Zacchaeus up in the tree and inviting himself to Zaccheus' house, and Z into a new life; Like Jacob on the run for his life, then realizing "Surely the Lord is in this place" and in it with me, and I didn't know it. Or Moses, turning aside to look at that burning bush; or Jesus asking the Samaritan woman for a drink. You can be sure that Zacchaeus, Jacob, Moses, and the Samaritan woman had plenty of days after these moments where they experienced doubt, darkness, and despair. Yet they had these breakthrough experiences, their own immediate well of grace from which to draw.

What about you? I'm willing to bet you have a few of these breakthrough moments, or you wouldn't be here worshipping with us in person or remotely. I had one just last week in Kauai, Hawaii, when I was helping to lead a conference for high school seniors bound for college. Their rapt attention and stated intentions to do their best to address complex problems, like plastic in the ocean, gave me hope in the faith of the next generation. Yes, Gen Z. Here at home at FPC, I returned to learn that Kathy Phillips had more people volunteer than were needed to host the funeral luncheon for Theone Neumann. Yes! A ramp built for a person for whom entering their home had become like climbing Mt. Everest. Yes! Our "Winter Wipe Out" project to give toiletries, colorful markers, and paper towels: essentials that fuel long days for folks needing assistance and community. Yes! Have you seen the 3-D jigsaw puzzle of wheelchairs, walkers, shower chairs and more in our Medical Equipment Loan closet? Returned and cleaned and ready for the moment of need in that transition from hospital to home that can

also seem like a mountain too high to climb. For any person free of charge in our Marshfield area. Yes!

Trust those moments to fuel your faith journey. Jesus trusted Peter's faith moment. And so can we. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" And Jesus asks us to answer that question every day, as well. With our words and our actions. Kaitlin Curtice, both a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation and a Christian, wrote a poem titled, "Who do you say God is?" as the introduction to her chapter, "The Struggle for Truth" in her book titled *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God*. I hear echoes of Psalm 19 and Jesus' conversation with Peter in her poem. It goes like this:

God is more language than this.

*God is more breath than lungs,
more oxygen than air,
more wind than atmosphere
in which to hold it.*

*God is more soul than us.
God is more time than schedules,
more grace than boundaries,
more everything than the imaginable.*

*And yet, we are constricted.
And yet, we say
language must be spoken,
breath must be breathed,
oxygen must revive.*

*We say
wind is the only spirit,
this soul is the end of us,
time rules the world,
grace is unreachable,
and everything is bound,
linear, and fathomed.*

What, then, is God?

*God is
exactly everything that is
and everything that we do not know of—
Mystery stacked upon Mystery,
Sacred enveloping Sacred,
Treasure buried within the pebbles
of our earth-kingdoms.ⁱⁱ*

Beloved Community: Grace is reachable, grace is touchable, mystery stacked upon mystery: here at this Table. With this bread and this cup. Grounding even more solid than the blessed moment when I step onto land after being on a boat, or when the airplane I am on touches down and I can take off my sea bands. At this grounding table, God is God, and we can be seen as our best selves: named and claimed, no matter how broken or bewildered as we may be.

As we prepare to come to this Table, I invite you now in our Longer Lenten Time for Silent Meditation to recall a time or place that has been a mountain top moment along your journey of faith. Then bring that memory, that "mount of praise," to the Table as we partake in this sacred meal.

ⁱ A Sanctified Art LLC/ sanctifiedart.org Lenten Theme 2024 Series

ⁱⁱ Kaitlin B. Curtice, *Native*, (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, MI, 2020), pp.78-79.