

August 13, 2017: Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
 Matthew 14:22-33: Things That Go Bump in Our Hearts

I had not been here at the church for very long when I first heard the rumors. It was actually one of the teens who told me. But he was only repeating something told to him by an adult relative. And I'll be honest, I wasn't all that surprised by what he said. I'm sure you all know all what I'm talking about, but just in case you don't, I'll tell you what rumors I'm referring to. Some people say this church is haunted.

It makes sense that people would think that. A place with so much history. We are basically surrounded by a cemetery. I don't know if I buy in to it, but I have had the experience of being here by myself and hearing strange, unexplained noises. You won't be surprised to know it has happened in the old church. I will go over there from time to time, for a variety of reasons, and I will hear creaking and cracking noises, even what something that sounds like footsteps in the balcony. Probably just the wind, but it's impossible to know for sure.

It has happened here in this building as well. I have heard doors slam shut when I'm here all by myself. And I have been told that someone actually spotted a ghost on the balcony in this sanctuary before. A woman. I wondered once if I caught of glimpse of her. Don't worry Bonnie, you could take her.

Every so often I will hear one of the self-flushing toilets in the men's restroom flush when no one is in the bathroom. But I have never heard it followed by the sound of the faucet. Someone using the bathroom without washing their hands afterwards scares me way more than a ghost ever could. If they are listening, I hope they don't consider that a challenge. I don't know if ghosts are real are not, and if they are, if one or more of them calls our church home. I'm not really worried about it, because I figure if that's true, there is nothing I could really do about it.

For centuries, people have wondered about the possibility of ghosts and goblins, and other similar types of creatures, and many have lived in fear of them. It's the kind of thing that has brought many people to their knees in prayer, believing it was something only God could protect them from. You might be familiar with some or all of this traditional Scottish poem...

*From ghoulies and ghosties
 And long-leggedy beasties
 And things that go bump in the night,
 Good Lord, deliver us!*

What about you. Do you believe in any of this stuff? Are you scared of things that go bump in the night?

What about things that go bump in your heart?

Early in the morning, in the darkest part of the night, in the midst of a storm-tossed sea, the disciples thought they were being haunted. They were scared of many things, but what were they most afraid of?

After Jesus had miraculously fed the multitudes on the sea shore, he sent them away. Then he sent his disciples away, instructing them to travel by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where he would join them later. In the meantime, he was going up the mountain to pray, to finally get the time away that he had been searching for.

As the night wore on, a bad storm arose on the sea, putting the disciples in a very precarious situation. This was not a small body of water. It was almost nine miles from one side to the other. Out in the middle, away from shore, the waves could get quite large. And the disciples' boat was not a cruise ship. It was probably fairly small. The word Matthew uses to describe what the waves were doing to it, battering it, could also be translated "tortured." This gives you an idea of what they were dealing with.

Try to imagine what they were feeling as they were tossed back and forth as wave after wave after wave crashed over them. Try to imagine staring out into the thick, inky darkness, where all you can see are the white caps of the waves moving all around you. You know you are miles from shore, and suddenly, through the sheets of rain you see a white, shadowy figure, walking toward you. And what if, on top of this, like the disciples, you believed the sea was the realm of evil? Wouldn't you be scared? Even if you didn't believe in ghosts, what other possible explanation could you come up with?

As soon as he was within ear shot, Jesus called out to them, identifying himself and trying to reassure them. They were still not completely convinced. So Peter, their self-appointed spokesman, challenged Jesus to prove his identity inviting him to leave the boat and walk toward him on the water. Jesus did, and Peter started heading toward him. When he was only a few feet away, he suddenly became aware of his surroundings. The wind, the waves, the feeling of being so near to evil. He started to sink, and cried out, "Lord, save me." And Jesus immediately reached out his hand, caught him, and pulled him to safety.

What do you think about this whole scenario would have frightened the disciples the most? The wind, the waves, the sea itself? Would it have been this ghostly figure, walking toward them on the water? All those things would have scared them to some extent, but I want to suggest to you this morning it was something else that they found even more frightening. It wasn't something external, but something internal that they were most afraid of. It was doubt. They were haunted by the possibility that somehow their faith would not be enough, and they would fail to receive the gift of salvation that Jesus had offered them.

This event occurred before Jesus was crucified, rose from the dead, and went to be with his heavenly Father, but the Gospels were composed many years later, even decades in some cases, to the first believers, struggling to maintain their faith in the midst of persecution, torture, battering...sound familiar? They saw themselves in this story, sent out into rough waters of an uncertain future alone, without Jesus. They were like Peter, men and women of little faith, struggling with doubt, wondering if they they would have enough faith to continue to believe, to continue to follow Jesus, in the face of very difficult circumstances.

Have you ever been haunted by your lack of faith, by the idea that when times get hard, your faith may not prove to be enough?

I think we all do, from time to time. Life happens. We find ourselves in the midst of a storm tossed sea. We get caught up in the wind and the waves, and the chaos that surrounds us. We lose sight of Jesus. We begin to doubt. It doesn't make sense for us to doubt, given all that God has done for us. Just as it didn't make sense for the disciples to doubt. They had just witnessed one of his most amazing miracles. Yet they doubted. We doubt. We doubt God's love for us. We doubt his forgiveness. We doubt the salvation that he has given to us. And we fear what will happen because of it.

It's fairly common to think of our faith almost as a type of currency. We think more faith equals greater purchasing power with God. So we have this idea that the more faith we have, the greater things God will do for us, and that the opposite is true, the less faith we have, the less God will do for us. And the worst case scenario, we fear that if we have too little, we will not have enough for God to save us.

Thinking of faith this way is wrong on so many levels, but we act as if it is what we believe. When I was in college I had a good friend who struggled a lot with depression. Someone told him that it was his fault, that if he had more faith, it would not be an issue. I had another friend who took medication for depression and other mental health issues. And someone told him that if he only had enough faith, he wouldn't need to take his medicine.

But we don't need other people to make us think there is some connection between a lack of faith and personal hardship. It's easy when we are going through a difficult time, or struggling with something, to think that a lack of faith is to blame. We think, if only I had more faith, I wouldn't have to go through this. But that is just not true. Faith is not a commodity that we can use to trade with God for divine favors. Bad things happen to the most faithful of God's people.

What Jesus did for the disciples that day on the Sea of Galilee was meant to put all their fears to rest. Just his presence on the sea proved to them that he was greater than all the storms they would face in life. He taught them a similar lesson earlier in Matthew's Gospel, where, with just his voice, he caused the wind and waves to cease. And his walking on the water in particular proved he was more powerful than all the powers of evil.

But when he reached out his hand, grabbing Peter as he began to sink, and pulling him to safety, he proved you don't need a whole lot faith to receive the gift of God's salvation. In fact, you don't need much at all, just enough to cry out, as Peter did, "Lord, save me." I'm also reminded of the thief on the cross, who had just enough faith to say, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." This is because our faith does not buy our salvation. It is a gift of God's grace, which he gives to us for no other reason than because of his great love for us.

My goal this morning was not to encourage you to have doubts, or suggest that it is something that we should strive for as Christians. The overwhelming message of the Bible is that we should continually strive to grow in our faith. But the Bible is also clear that growing in our faith is a process, a journey, and that the chances are good that we will have moments of doubt along the way. I want you to know that it is ok, that in those moments where your faith grows thin, you have nothing to fear, because the grace of God will carry you through. Not only do you have nothing to fear, you can be thankful for those moments, because God will use them to make your faith stronger. Amen.