

August 9, 2020

'On the Edge of the Diving Board'

Rev. Jane Courtright

*(Exodus 14:10-25, Matthew 14:22-33)*

Many young women and men who endure basic training in the Armed Forces, find themselves in the oppressive summer humidity of Georgia or South Carolina. Maybe YOU can identify with the experience of Charles Byrd, a minister and commentator. He tells a story of his own paratrooper training one summer in Georgia. He remembers, "My company believed that we were the most miserable of all human beings!"

Their miserable experience was caused because of the hot, humid summer, but largely because of what Byrd calls "Our extremely hard-boiled jump masters. He remembers, "Most of us felt that the parachute jumps themselves were bad enough, and the constant threat of the jumper master's raised, steel-toed boot didn't help the already tense situation! If someone hesitated to jump out of the plane, the jump master was always willing to add a not-too-gentle assist to any soldier who needed it."

The situation of that paratrooper before jumping from the plane mirrors many times of our lives! I can't help but think of the essential workers during our current pandemic, including medical workers and teachers. And the elderly and their caregivers, not by choice physically distanced. Surely, there are times when they feel "we are the most miserable of human beings!" There are times when it also becomes necessary for me and you to step out in a certain direction with nothing but faith and determination to show the way. It's not an easy thing to take this step, and sometimes it is good to have someone or something behind us to give an extra push – even if the help seems a bit much.

There is a difference between the paratrooper's doubt and fear, and the doubt and fear of Jesus' followers in today's gospel reading. The paratrooper's hesitancy was caused by fear of death, while in today's Biblical readings, the people hesitated as a result of their fear of life!

Both the Hebrew people and Moses in our Hebrew Scripture reading and Peter in our Gospel reading, had taken great steps of faith – aided and encouraged by God and by Jesus. Sure, at critical times in their journeys, they had fear and doubt.

After crossing the peninsula of the South Sinai with the Egyptian army hot in pursuit, Moses and his people hesitated to cross waters near the Red Sea. They were fearful of death, but more importantly, they were afraid of life! In the Gospel reading, Peter in faith, bidden by Jesus to do so, walked across the sea to Jesus. Yet when Peter encounters the wind of the storm, he hesitates and begins to sink in the sea of his doubt. He is afraid of the future – afraid of life!

These two stories, known as "The Parting of the Red Sea," and "Jesus Walking on Water," are remembered from our childhoods because their telling is so dramatic! In Sunday School pictures, as well as films, we remember Moses with his rod, parting the sea. Do you remember a great wall of water standing up on each side of the Hebrew people, as though held up by sheets of glass? Do you remember pictures of Jesus walking upon the crashing

sea, his bare or sandaled feet on the surface of the water – or even inches above it? While the drama of these stories make them memorable, it can also make it hard for many adults to take them seriously. We may focus on the details, but miss the real meaning of the stories!

We might not be able to fully grasp the fear of Moses' people in ancient Egypt or the storm in 1st Century Palestine, but there are plenty of storms that engulf our lives today. Personal storms engulf us – the ending of a marriage or relationship, depression or suicidal thoughts, the trouble of a child. Societal storms surround us – judgements made because we may be following different Coronavirus safety protocols than others, police taking the lives of unarmed people of color on a seemingly weekly basis, the prison-industrial complex, economic inequality and exploitation, unfair education discrepancies. There are many storms both personal and societal that can engulf and surround our lived realities.

And these storms can be like chains. Chains like this pandemic, like racism, like poverty - chains that create fear in us and in our communities. Chains that have the power to incapacitate us and our communities. Chains that carry a debilitating distress to our personal and community bodies.

How about YOU? Have you ever, like Moses and his people, found yourself on the edge of something, but afraid to go on???? Or like Peter, starting forward in faith, but suddenly sinking in a storm?

Denise Kankin, a Christian storyteller, describes this feeling. “You know what it’s like. Standing too close to the edge. The diving board hangs so far out that you can’t see anything but water! Like looking down out of an airplane over the ocean. Nothing under you or beside you. Except water. Nothing to catch you. Nothing to fall back on, your toes curl over the edge. You fight for balance. Going off the diving board. Who will catch you? Who will rescue you: Who will fish you out of the water? You are perched on the edge of the diving board. YOU know what it’s like. To be that scared.

But it passes, doesn’t it? When you paddle to the surface of the pool. When you are pulled out of the water by the armpits and wrapped in a sun warmed towel. Remember how weak your knees are for a while. And how your heart pounds. Lucky for you, you have someone to turn to. Someone to take care of you, to fish you out of the pool. Someone you can just think about now to know they are there when you are in need. Just to think about them. Who is it for you?”

For the Hebrew people during their exodus from Egypt, and for Peter and the disciples in a storm at sea – God was there. When their knees were weak with doubt, and their hearts pounded with fear, God was there to pull them out by their armpits. God uses people, me and you, to be the hands and words which reach out to others!

It was Jesus who assured the frightened disciples by saying, “Take heart, it is I, have no fear,” and Jesus’ hands which lifted the sinking Peter. It was Moses who encouraged the people when they hesitated in doubt. Moses said, “Fear not, stand firm.”

In life, the wind is often contrary. There are just times when we are up against it, and life is a desperate struggle. We struggle with ourselves, with our circumstances, with our temptations, with our grief, with our decisions. God is with us in all situations, and it is God who urges us forward.

Remember Charles Byrd, the hot and miserable paratrooper in basic training in Georgia? He believes that the paratrooper never completely loses the fear of jumping. What the paratrooper gains is faith in the parachute, which gives the jumper the courage to jump.

The business person, teen, mother, child, minister, disciple – all of God’s people, may hesitate, may even tremble at making decisions. The way is easier when you and I realize there is always someone or something ready to give the necessary boost to urge us to take that giant step. And when the step is taken, jumpers will find a canopy of God’s grace, divers will find a life jacket to sustain them and help them overcome fears.

There are many storms that surround us right now. There are many chains binding our communities. May we reach out to God and may we be the arms of God for other people in the midst of a storm. Amen.