

Doxology

Matthew 14:22-33

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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It is almost exactly five months to the day that we last held a Sunday morning worship service here in the building. The last time we gathered here for a Sunday morning service was Sunday, March 8.

I remember that week well. We held our service on the 8th but almost immediately after the news grew increasingly ominous.

The pandemic was officially declared on March 11 and by the following Sunday, March 15, it had become clear that we needed to suspend Sunday services and all in-person church activities.

It's been a difficult five months. We've had to learn how to do worship remotely, whether in recorded services or gathering on Zoom. Many in our church have been very isolated. Most of us have missed the rhythms and routines of normal life.

And, of course, the pandemic isn't over. We're still in the middle of this thing and the future remains far from clear. There could be more waves to come that require adapting with more restrictions. We continue to live in uncertain times.

The only thing that has become certain over these past five months is that we have to learn how to live with uncertainty.

But having said *all this*, even if there aren't very many of us, and even though it feels far from normal, and even though we have no idea what fall will hold, it is good to be back together, here, on a Sunday morning.

I want to begin with a story about a horse.

I've been picking away at John Steinbeck's classic work *East of Eden* over the past few weeks. It's a fascinating book about the interweaving stories of two men and their families in the early twentieth century, Adam Trask and Samuel Hamilton.

In one scene, Samuel has visited Adam at his farm and now he is preparing to return home on his horse named "Doxology." Adam and his Chinese servant Lee are sending him off.

Doxology stood patiently in the stall, head down, his milky eyes staring at the straw under his feet.

"You've had that horse forever," Adam said.

"He's thirty-three," said Samuel. "His teeth are worn off. I have to feed him warm mash with my fingers. And he has bad dreams. He shivers and cries sometimes in his sleep.

"He's about as ugly a crow bait as I ever saw," Adam said.

"I know it. I think that's why I picked him when he was a colt. Do you know I paid two dollars for him thirty-three years ago? Everything was wrong with him, hoofs like flapjacks, a hock so thick and short and straight there seems no joint at all. He's hammerheaded and swaybacked. He has a pinched chest and a big behind. He has an iron mouth and he still fights the crupper...

[A "crupper," I learned, is a strap buckled to the back of a saddle and looped under the horse's tail to prevent the saddle or harness from slipping forward].

With a saddle he feels as though you were riding a sled over a gravel pit. He can't trot and he stumbles over his feet when he walks. I have never in thirty-three years found one good thing about him. He even has an ugly disposition. He is selfish and quarrelsome and mean and disobedient. To this day I don't dare walk behind him because he will surely take a kick at me. When I feed him mash he tries to bite my hand. And I love him.

Lee said, "And you named him 'Doxology.'"

"Surely," said Samuel, "so ill endowed a creature deserved, I thought, one grand possession."¹

¹ John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin, 1952), 303.

I felt sorry for poor Doxology after I read this passage. And I loved Samuel for loving him and for giving him such a strange and beautiful name.

We're familiar with the word "doxology," right? It's the name of a song that we sing before meals sometimes. *Praise God from whom all blessings flow...*

And "praise" is literally what the Greek word "doxology" means.

Doxa = "glory" and *-logia*, *Logos* = speech, oration. So, put together, the word means to give praise.

A horse like Samuel's with a name that means "give praise" is, of course, highly ironic. It would be something like me giving our little old white fluffy dog Woody the name "Brutus" or "Dogzilla." It doesn't really fit.

And the name "Doxology" doesn't fit this horse either. There's nothing about him that seems worthy of praise.

But Samuel insists that even so "ill-endowed a creature deserved one grand possession."

It led me to think of another "ill-endowed creature" with a grand possession of a name. I'm speaking, of course, about Peter.

Peter goes by a few names in the gospels.

- **Simon:** means "hearing" or "listening"
- **Cephas:** from *Kepha* in Aramaic and becomes Cephas in Greek (means rock or stone, some scholars even say "precious stone" or "jewel") ... which becomes, via Latin to English...
- **Peter:** a more playful interpretation of this word would be "Rocky."

Peter is front and center in our text this morning, courageously walking toward Jesus on the stormy waters and then faithlessly sinking when he takes his eyes off Jesus.

Peter is perhaps the easiest of the disciples for us to identify with. Peter occasionally rises to heights of faithfulness that we aspire to. But Peter also makes the mistakes that we would

make. Peter is all of us.

- It is Peter who is the first to confess Jesus as the Messiah... and immediately after, refuses to accept that Jesus must suffer, which leads to a prompt rebuke from Jesus— "Get behind me Satan!" (Mat. 16:22-23)
- It is Peter who is the eager beaver pupil on the Mount of Transfiguration—wants to build shelters to commemorate the holy moment with Elijah, Moses, and Jesus, before he is interrupted by a divine voice with different priorities and falls down terrified (Mat. 17:3-6).
- It is Peter who thinks he is impressing Jesus in a discussion about forgiveness by saying, "Up to seven times?" and is then stunned by Jesus' response: "Not seven times, but seventy times seven..." (Mat. 18:21-22).
- It is Peter who falls asleep while praying in Gethsemane (Mat. 26:40). *Could you not stay awake one hour?*
- It is Peter who cuts off a Roman soldier's ear in a spasm of righteous violence (John 18:10)
- It is Peter who, in one of the most gut-wrenching scenes in the gospels, denies Jesus explicitly, and then weeps at the realization of what he has done (John 18:25-27)

Peter is not exactly an ugly, grouchy, crippled old horse.

But he doesn't always live up to the nickname Jesus gives him. He doesn't always act very "rocky." He is not always unmoving and unwavering in his faith.

Come to think of it, he doesn't always live up to his given name "Simon" either. Not the greatest listener!

Peter is a flawed human being like all of us, but one who nonetheless grows in faith and in faithfulness.

Eventually he does indeed become the rock upon which the church is built. He is one of the eyewitnesses to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, a leader in the early church, and, ultimately, a martyr who died for his faith, being crucified by the Roman emperor Nero.

(Church tradition holds that he insisted upon being crucified upside down because he was not worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.)

Peter, like Jacob and Solomon and other biblical figures we've looked at over the last few

weeks, was profoundly human.

But just like Samuel and his horse Doxology, Jesus looked at Peter and loved him for who he was. And his disposition toward us is exactly the same. Jesus loves us as exactly as we are, despite all of our flaws.

If the sermon ended right here, that would probably be a good word for us to leave with.

But let's zero in a bit further in our passage this morning. The story begins with an interesting image. Jesus, alone, on the top of a mountain, praying.

The disciples, down below, in the middle of a storm.

Isn't this just how it often feels for us in life? We're in the middle of a raging storm, whether it's the storm of a health crises or a relationship breakdown, or the loss of employment, or depression or anxiety about the future in the midst of a pandemic...

...and Jesus is somewhere else.

He's off doing holy things, praying on a mountain somewhere. Which is fine, but it's not particularly useful to us down in the storm. We'd rather he come and flex his divine muscles, and, you know, fix a few things for us.

I suspect Peter felt the same. *Where are you, Lord? We're drowning here!*

And then, after hours of struggling in the storm, Jesus *is* there. But Peter and the disciples aren't sure if it's really him. They're afraid. Maybe they're hallucinating. Maybe it's a ghost. Or worse.

What's wrong with them? Haven't they just witnessed Jesus miraculously feeding five thousand people on the hillside? Don't they remember that Jesus calmed a raging storm back in Matthew 8? Surely, they know by now that Jesus is capable of the miraculous!

But fear is a more natural response than faith, then and now.

Jesus calls out to them: "Take courage, it is I. Don't be afraid."

The Greek words we translate as “It is I” are *Ego eimi*, which literally means, “I am.”

It’s how the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) translates the voice of God out of the burning bush when a quaking Moses asks who he should tell the Israelite slaves has sent him.

I am. I am who I am (Exodus 3:14).

Jesus is identifying himself, as he has throughout the book of Matthew, with God himself.

Peter doubts. *If it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water.*

Jesus graciously accommodates Peter’s unbelief (not for the last time). And for a while, Peter does ok. His eyes are on Jesus and—incredibly! —he’s walking on water.

But then the wind picks up, and Peter’s fear returns. He cries out to Jesus for rescue. And Jesus reaches out to save him (also, not for the last time).

“You of little faith,” Jesus says. “Why did you doubt?” They climb in the boat and the storm subsides.

The story ends where my sermon began. With doxology. The disciples worship Jesus, saying, “truly you are the Son of God.”

And this is the point of the story. In the end, it isn’t so much about Peter as about Jesus and Jesus’ identity.

I’ve listened to a lot of sermons on this story that say some version of, “Now, we must learn from Peter and have faith to get out of the comfort of our boats and take a step of faith,” or “We must keep our eyes on Jesus instead of the storms of life,” or “We must not doubt like Peter but believe.”

There is some truth in these applications—there are undoubtedly practical lessons of faith to learn from Peter’s role in this story.

But in the end, this is not primarily an object lesson in human faithfulness (or lack thereof). It is one of many revelations in the gospels of the identity of Jesus and of the way in which Jesus reveals God to us.

Jesus is again revealed to be the one who is Lord over the chaotic and turbulent storm. The one who walked on water is the same one who hovered over the waters of the deep and breathed the world into being.

Jesus is revealed to be the one who comes to us in our weakness, frailty, and faithlessness. *Don't be afraid, I am here. I am with you in the storm. I will lead you out the other side. I will pick you up when you fall.*

Jesus is revealed to be the true and proper object of our worship.

Our task is certainly to have faith, to trust, to respond to the call of Jesus to follow him.

But even beyond that, our task is praise. Our response is to offer a doxology, to give glory to God.

Part of the reason for this is practical. Living lives dedicated to praising God keeps the focus off of where it usually ends up. Ourselves.

Ron Rolheiser puts it this way in an essay called "The Value of Praying a Doxology":

[D]aily, hourly, we need to give glory to God, to pray a doxology. Only by focusing ourselves on the real centre of the universe can we displace ourselves from that centre.²

So, we praise God in part because it keeps our focus ourselves. And this is good for us!

But beyond practical reasons, I think that the most authentic doxologies bubble out of us naturally in response to the beauty and the love of Christ.

We offer our doxologies because we see Jesus dragging his children out of stormy waters.

² Ron Rolheiser, "The Value of Praying a Doxology," in *Northern Lights: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Writing in Canada* (Mississauga, ON: Wiley), 198.

Because we see him refusing empty praise, slicing through selfish motives and ambitions and false pieties and demanding integrity. Because we see him prioritizing the people who most of us have far too little time for.

Because we see him suffering and dying for the very people who rejected him. Because we see him taking our many failures and offering forgiveness.

We offer our praise because we see Jesus showing us what love actually looks like, bringing light out of darkness, and life out of death.

To all this, our only response can be praise.

Last week, I shared a sermon by Debie Thomas. This week I want to again give the last word to her:

Jesus never stops moving towards the ones he loves. He never stops crossing the dark water to come to where we are. Neither our fearfulness nor our faithlessness ever alters his steady approach. We are the ones he's bound for. Our flailing bodies are the ones he pulls out of the water. Ours is the boat he climbs into. It is for us that he calls out across the terrifying waves, again and again and again: "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid."³

May we, like Peter and the disciples, respond to God's constant movement toward us with our doxologies.

Amen.



³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2709>