

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

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What in the world would have induced Jesus to take a walk on the sea in the middle of the night in the midst of a violent storm? After all, he was safely ashore and deeply in prayer when the winds came up. Why not just wait it out and take a boat in the morning when it would be safe and light? Usually the first question that Christians tend to ask is, “How can Jesus do that? How can he avoid sinking into the depths of the sea?” But maybe the even better first question could be, “What is he doing there in the first place?” Why would he or anybody set out on a journey in the midst of a gale storm at three in the morning? Was he there just to show off his super powers or to put on an impressive display of his magic? No, the answer is clearly much more obvious: He was there because that’s where his friends were, in peril in their boat and in danger of drowning. They were miles from shore and there was no coast guard to come to the rescue. In fact, only Jesus knew that they were out there at all. There was no other help.

It is St. Peter who serves as the representative of this shifting of the question. When Jesus first appears to them on the water and assures them that it is truly He and not a ghost, Peter’s first response is as if to say, “Oh yeah, then prove it. Tell me to come to you.” It is a cocky, presumptuous reply that shows Peter as being more impressed with the magic trick than with the fact of Jesus’ arrival. And it shows that he doesn’t yet really understand the kind of danger that he and his companions are in.

But as always, Jesus shows his patience and his forbearance with his friend Peter. The more appropriate first response upon seeing Jesus ought to have been, “Praise God you’ve found us! Thank you Lord, for your care!” But as usual, Peter needs to learn the hard way. The minute he becomes afraid and doubtful and begins to sink, he no longer is very interested in having Jesus prove himself. Suddenly, it’s a lot more cut-to-the-chase: “Lord! Save me!” And Jesus does.

But before we pile on Peter in judgement too quickly, we ought to consider our own situation and our own responses to it, both within our communities, nations and world. There are plenty of resonances with Peter.

We Christians have been presented with the astonishing good news that Jesus has arrived, and is right here with us to help us and save us in our situation right now. But for how many of us is the first instinctive reaction to that news to say, in effect, “Oh yeah, then prove it.” Do something fantastical to impress us.” Only people who don’t yet really appreciate what the danger truly is, and the fact that there is no other help, and the sheer grace of the fact that God chose to come to *us* before we knew we needed him; only people like that—like *us*—could fail to cry out, “Praise God you’ve found us! Thank you for your care!”

For many of us and others, it is necessary to come to some sort of crisis, as Peter did when he finally noticed the howling wind and his moistening feet, before we are moved to make a decision for real faith: “Lord Save Me!” That’s what it is to learn the hard way. But it doesn’t *have* to be hard; it doesn’t *have* to require a crisis.

We can turn to the prophet Elijah in today’s first reading as a demonstration of that. He was a man who knew and appreciated God’s intimate presence all the time, which is why he could see and hear and understand when God was speaking to him. How did he get that way? Through a lifetime of prayer, worship and paying attention to the God who was everywhere and in every circumstance, especially those of desperation and danger. There was no crisis at the moment when God chose to come near to Elijah in today’s story. But Elijah heard God’s

voice and knew how to recognize God's presence. It wasn't in any of the impressive displays of power—like the heavy wind or the earthquake or the fire—those things that people looking for “proofs” tend to be impressed with. It was, instead, in the “tiny, whispered sound,” and so it was then that Elijah hid his face as if to say, “Praise God that you found me! Thank you lord for your care.”

The true miracle of today's Gospel of Jesus walking on the water is not that Jesus can defy the laws of nature—although that's impressive, too. The miracle is that Jesus has arrived, and appeared and chosen to be with us, sometimes long before we know how desperately we need him.

For us, by cultivating a life of friendship with Christ through our prayers, and service and community involvement, we can grow into understanding the difference between the Lord who truly is with us, and a ghost. We don't need proofs to recognize the true presence of a true friend and savior. What we do at each gathering for Eucharist at St. Pascal's is exactly that: We dedicate ourselves day by day, week by week, to better recognizing our Lord when he appears. So that when he does appear, our response is not, “How can this be?” but is, instead, “Praise God that you've found us! Thank you for your care!”