

Even Peter Knew
Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church
August 10, 2008

I Kings 19:9-15

Matthew 14:22-33

I am grateful for the opportunity of being here this day. Regardless of whether it is a storm or light rain outside, and whether I come on-board in the midst of thunder or from dry land, this ship is home, and I am thankful.

Thanks also to Denise and Dale, who have been resource, encouragement and mentors to me for this day. And Denise: May Spirit flow through the hands and hearts of those gathered this day, touching and surrounding you unto evermore health and wholeness.

And thanks to my friends Judy and Stephen for their assistance this morning, helping to represent the 31 of us from Binkley who participated in this year's phenomenon know as Baptist Youth Camp. Perhaps you have heard something of this event, in formal or informal ways. I am actually rather certain that you have, because I have discovered and learned over and over again that the stories of *that* mountaintop, as it is described in our morning's worship guide banner, and the things that happen on that mountain, cannot and will not stay on the mountain!

BYC, as we call it these days, began almost 19 years ago when a group of congregational staff ministers and seminary colleagues who were working with youth wanted to share in providing a safe, inclusive, authentic and interactive environment for young people to experience the Divine in fresh and challenging ways, to express faith and even doubt to and among listening ears, and to live as a community that is blessed and bestows blessing as beloved children of God. Our congregation has been involved with BYC since Year 2.

Through the years and in four locations, some 22 congregations from 7 states have been involved with BYC. And with grant support from the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, the phenomenon and "good news" of Baptist Youth Camp is spreading even farther. One week from today, congregations along the Great Lakes region of our country will together launch another camp, modeled after BYC. I was gratified to be joined by other youth camp participants, including Binkley youth camp alumni, in an advisory capacity as this new camp was envisioned.

My reflections may now take a turn that could cause Stephen, Judy and other BYC participants in the congregation this morning to run for the exits, with the temptation to drown themselves in the baptistery on the way out! *They have heard it so much!*

Today, BYC functions as a *covenant* community of eight congregations from five states. I describe it as a covenant community because we are compelled of and intentional about sharing the belief that we belong to and with each other in explicable and inexplicable ways, even though we are vastly different. I describe it that way because these congregations have declared the desire and intent to help create and embrace a diverse community of inclusion, hospitality, experiential learning, worship, spiritual formation, relationship and accountability. I describe it that way because of the willingness and commitment of staff and lay ministers in these congregations to share their ministries with each other in this community, and to allow this community to influence their lives and their respective ministries in very significant ways. And finally, I describe it that way because our vision and ideas of *covenant* have been a part of even the most basic and mundane of our "structures," if you will, the *camp rules!*

Of course, we don't call them *rules*, and never have! As you can imagine, a group of process-oriented congregations who like to carefully craft their expressions to appreciatively reflect their outlook are going to

find another way to describe this list. We've used "norms," we've used "expectations," "guidelines," anything but "rules."

Of course, "rules" is what they are.....you know.....those things that you have to name and model in order to build a safe, productive, respectful and healthy environment. And by casting this structure and discussion in terms of *covenant*, we broaden the discussion of who we are.

We are not just saying how we are going to behave, but how we are going to live and be with each other. We are concentrating on what we *are* doing, rather than on what we are not going to do. And we have taken the discussion from the circle of the Planning Team, to include the youth participants and their families.

You can more than imagine what such "discussion" was like: "Who are we?" "Who are we to each other?" "Who are we in the world?" "What is our role?" "What is our mission?" "How do we share it?" Conversations like that have certainly *not* happened within *these* walls, now have they?!

How about *our* Covenant: You know, that declaration we make no less than once a month? I expect that some sighed with relief when the discussion of that revision was completed! AND, though not a contradiction to the relief at all, I suspect that some of us, myself included, believed that once the new declaration was complete, the conversation and work really begins.

For how is it possible for human beings to make covenant with God, much less with each other? Covenant-making is God's business, for after all, a covenant is an absolute and unilateral pledge of support, affirmation and faithfulness, *no matter what*. It is not a contract, a negotiated agreement to do something *in return* for something else. It is a declaration to be and to do, come what may, come what *will*. It is no wonder that while both of our lectionary texts for this morning draw us into and speak to us of covenant, in so doing the other pervasive theme is fear.

Elijah was on the run from the wrath of Ahab and more significantly Jezebel, whose Canaanite gods and idols Elijah had vigorously opposed. In what seems to me to be a mysterious foreshadowing of Jesus being driven into the wilderness following his baptism, Elijah is ushered to a mountaintop by an angel, the same mountain on which God had first and finally established an everlasting covenant with God's people. No doubt, Elijah was looking to be sustained by and hear the presence and voice of God in the mighty forces of nature that God controlled, and that as so Elijah thought, were instrumental in the defeat of false prophets. But God's voice came to Elijah not in the storm but in the quiet, meeting him in his fear but not allowing him to cringe for his life any longer. Elijah was given a new mission and calling. Though Elijah expected to hear God in the thunder, he recognized God in the quiet.

It was just the opposite for the disciples of Jesus. Having been sent ahead of Jesus across the lake to rest after a long day of teaching, healing and feeding 5,000 with a mere pittance of food, the disciples were no doubt tired and distracted, even though they were in very familiar waters. The storms come at that point of the night just before daybreak, the darkest point of the night when fear is most likely to grip any of us. And while the disciples thought that Jesus had abandoned the storm to pray in private, they (or at least Peter) recognizes Jesus and hears the voice of God in the storm.

I can think of no better example of us in covenant-living as humans than Peter. He was the one, you recall, who on another mountain, the mountain of transfiguration, wanted to have a carnival, building booths for Jesus and for our friends Elijah and Moses! This is the one who is passionate but quick-tempered, well-meaning but impetuous, and the one who speaks for us.

I believe that even Peter knew he could not walk of water, but he steps out of the boat for Jesus, to meet Jesus in covenant-living as best as is *humanly* possible. It is in the very act and moment of grasping God that Peter realizes that God is grasping him.

How easy is it for fears to get in the way? Are they not always part of our inner dialogue? As individuals? As a congregation?

Fear: That we don't have all the answers for ourselves and others, therefore feeling we are inadequate to help.

Fear: When we read or hear the news and fear where the world is going.

We fear that our work or contributions are not making a difference, robbing our vocation of pleasure.

We fear of offending people, or that people will not like us if they knew us as we are.

We fear for financial security, constraining our career choices or our reactions to the needs of others.

Fear of our relationships leads us to cling, or to flee, or both.

Who are we to think that we can walk on water?

"Do not be afraid" is the encouragement of Scripture to us over and over again. These are usually the first words out of angels' mouths. Abraham, Moses, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, shepherds tending their flocks, Paul sitting in a jail cell, the women looking for Christ's body at Easter and disciples rowing a boat in the strong wind all hear these words. It is said that these words occur almost 100 times in the Scriptures. Apparently we humans are very fearful creatures, living in covenant or not, and we need faith to function at all in our world.

Stories of Peter often draw me to cartoons, this story to the coyote chasing the roadrunner off the cliff. The roadrunner always makes it across the gap, but every time the coyote, halfway across, is aware there is nothing beneath his feet and plummets down.

Jesus asks, "Why do you doubt?" I want to jump in and defend Peter, "Hello, Lord! Waves and wind! Not to mention it simply isn't possible to walk on water!" To be afraid and to doubt in the face of danger is human. If God's demand of us is not to fear or to doubt, then we are asked to accomplish far more than walking on water.

I think that Jesus speaks to Peter and to us rather as a friend, knowing our limitations:

"You are doing it! You had it! Don't lose that!"

Faith is never settled, once and for all. When I grasp God, or more accurately in that moment when God grasps me, I lose this awareness. "Have faith" is never one of those things that I get to check-off my list of accomplishments.

Peter's relationship with Jesus lets him step out of the boat and, just as important, lets him call for help when he is sinking. Jesus' love for his disciples sends him walking out into the storm to find them in the first place. Jesus' relationship with Peter lets him invite Peter into the raging sea, to chide Peter for his wavering trust, and most important, lets him reach out to Peter with a compassionate hand.

May it be so for us, in our lives, in our classrooms and offices, in our bedrooms, in our hospital rooms, in our jail cells, at the gravesides of our lives, evermore unto our own. Thanks be to God. Amen.