

It doesn't happen much anymore, but over the years, several people have asked me outright why I don't have kids. And the answer to that is part circumstance and part medical, but the biggest part is that I believe parenthood is a calling, arguably the highest-stakes vocation one can have, and I never really heard the call. Occasionally I have wondered if maybe I had not been listening when God was speaking. But these last six weeks raising not a child but just an adolescent puppy...I didn't need to be the primary person responsible for tiny human beings. I had forgotten the constant vigilance required to keep the dog out of trouble and out of danger, and more than once I've wondered what possessed me to voluntarily re-introduce that chaos to my life. I imagine God feels that way about humanity sometimes; in fact, Genesis tells us God had some second thoughts. We often speak about God as our parent, and Jesus taught us to think of God that way, to pray to Our Father; so much of scripture can be read as God's patient, faithful, loving parenting of us, even and especially when we act like stubborn children (or defiant labradoodles). Today's gospel is one of those stories.

This scene happens immediately after Jesus feeds the multitude, and Jesus feeds the multitude immediately after hearing about the murder of his cousin, John the Baptist. Jesus tries to take some time by himself to mourn John's death, but the crowd finds him. Even in his pain and grief Jesus doesn't get his moment alone because the people are still sick and need Jesus to heal them, they're still hungry and need Jesus to feed them; the work of compassionate care is never ending. Sounds familiar to you parents, doesn't it? So now, at long last, after the sick have been healed, the hungry have been fed, and the leftovers have been put away, now, finally, Jesus makes the disciples get into a boat and dismisses the rest of the crowd so he can go up the mountain by himself to pray. *Get in the boat, go entertain yourselves for awhile, I need a minute.*

But of course, Jesus hasn't really left his disciples to fend for themselves, and when they get into trouble on the water, he comes to their aid. The Sea of Galilee can be quite rough; when I was there our tour was postponed because the waves were too much for our modern boat. The disciples, battered by the storm in the middle of the night, were likely terrified even before they see Jesus walking toward them on the water, thinking they are seeing a ghost. Jesus immediately reassures them, identifying himself as *I Am*—the name God tells Moses to use when the Israelites ask who sent him. Then Jesus tells them *do not be afraid*...which is always what someone in the bible says in situations where any sane person would, in fact, be very afraid.

Peter has gotten a lot of criticism—for sinking when he notices the wind, for getting out of the boat in the first place, for asking Jesus to prove himself by calling him out of the boat.

But credit where credit is due, Peter is the one disciple who does exactly what Jesus commands: he stops being afraid, at least long enough to leave the safety of the boat to walk toward the person whom he trusts even more than a port in the storm. And at first, Peter succeeds! Like a kid learning to ride a bike who hasn't yet realized you've let go of the back of the seat, he's doing it! Then, Matthew says, he notices the wind—which somewhere in the back of his mind he had to have known was there all along, causing the storm in the first place—but Peter perceives the wind and becomes frightened, then he starts to sink. We might say he suddenly realizes what he's doing, overthinks it, and loses confidence in himself. He cries out *Lord, save me!* And Jesus immediately reaches out and catches him.

What we think Jesus meant when he said, *You of little faith, why did you doubt?* or the tone we think he used when he said it tells us something about how we see our relationship with God. Is Jesus disappointed in Peter? Is he criticizing him for not having enough faith? Faith in who or what? Doubting who or what? Notice that Peter never loses faith in Jesus: as soon as Peter starts to sink, he asks Jesus for help, which he receives. So it's not Jesus whom Peter doubts. And if we look at the whole of the gospel, Jesus assures the disciples that if they have faith the size of a mustard seed they'll be able to move mountains; so Jesus isn't necessarily scolding Peter when he says *you of little faith*. Rather than hearing Jesus' words as criticizing, reprimanding, or belittling a child who falters while attempting something difficult and frightening, couldn't we read *You of little faith, why did you doubt* more like an encouraging parent saying, *Come on Peter—you've got this! Look how far your faith has gotten you! You can do it—don't you doubt yourself when I have faith in you!*

And God does have faith in us. It's not just that God is faithful to us, but God has faith in us and what we can accomplish through the Spirit's strength and guidance. Matthew's gospel is the one that ends with Jesus commissioning the eleven: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching everything I have commanded you*. He says that to them as they are both worshipping *and* doubting, and not because of *their* amazing abilities, but because *he* promises to be with them always, to the end of the age. So when God calls us to do big, scary things, we can take those steps boldly because God is right there with us, both to show us the way and to catch us when we lose confidence and start to sink. We might be the kind of people who only think to call out to God for help when the storm is raging; or we might struggle to perceive the Lord except in the sound of sheer silence...but God is there, in the chaos and the calm, and everywhere else in between. So we can take heart and not be afraid; after all, we're even trying to walk on water. But with God cheering us on, what might we do next?