

Proper 14A – August 5, 2008

The scripture today really is a description of what we can do with God's help. Starting with Joseph and winding up with Peter. God's gift to Joseph – interpreting dreams, got him first nearly killed by his brothers. Not only was he Dad's favorite son, but he dreamed that he would someday rule over them. Later, he is his brothers' and father's salvation. And then there's Peter.

Don't you just feel for Peter? He is one of us, if not us. He reacts on the spot. He is a fisherman. Fishermen are hard core, ready to move quickly to respond to the fish and to the weather. Strong, physically and mentally.

Peter, like the rest of Jesus followers, does have a strong belief in Jesus. But when it comes time to accept Jesus invitation to leave the boat in the middle of a storm, well, he knows that that is just plain stupid – and very dangerous. Peter just can't trust Jesus over his own knowledge of the Sea of Galilee, especially with his life.

Jesus scolds Peter, but keeps him in the top ranks of the apostles. Remember that Peter also denies Jesus (as predicted) three times, also to save his own life. But after the Crucifixion, Peter is mentioned in each Gospel as being at the Tomb on Easter Morning. And in John, he promises to be faithful yet again. But this time it sticks. Throughout the Book of Acts he defends his belief and declares to everyone his faith in Jesus. This time it is for real. Til his death.

He finally realized that he was not in control of his life – God was. And after that, he went further than he could have ever imagined. A true man of faith.

Today we are celebrating the Baptism of Alessandra Ramirez. What is wonderful about Baptisms is that they allow the entire congregation to renew their promise as a Christians. We are asked to renounce the power that evil has over us. We accept that Jesus is central to our belief in God. And we promise to live a life that reflects our understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

We are asked to make specific promises. We answer, along with the person being baptized and her sponsors, with the words, "I will with God's help."

We promise to worship regularly, keep up an intentional prayer and spiritual life, study scripture, respond to the needs of others, be good stewards of God's creation and our own gifts, and to spread the good news of God in Christ.

And then the special treat – the congregation promises as a whole to support the new Christian in all her efforts in becoming one of God's own. We know we haven't achieved all the promises we have made, and over time, she probably won't either. But it doesn't stop us from understanding how we support each other through the tough times.

There will be plenty of tough situations. We will wrap our congregational arms around her and her family in times of stress, sickness, and danger. But that's not all. We will help her learn what is a good choice in life, who to trust, who to listen to, how to find out what God has given us. And accept her when she fails and support her when she wants to start over.

What stops us, like Peter, is the great fear of how far we might go, if we really give up trusting only in ourselves. Using our weaknesses as excuses keeps us secure in our own routine life. We know exactly what our limitations are, and can fit more or less comfortably within them. We don't challenge ourselves beyond what we want to accomplish. Then we aren't disappointed. It takes people with a dedicated purpose to

move forward. So it is easy for us, like Peter, just to trust our own instincts for survival and believe in what we can see and understand on our own terms. It is only when our own concepts broaden that we can grow either in earthly or spiritual ways.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to tie a box. But suppose that you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn’t you then first discover how much you really trusted it? Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief.”

So as long as Peter could be sure that Jesus was a strong man of God, he had a rope that he could use to tie a box. But as a professional fisherman, he lived in concrete terms. Maybe the winds can die down and the waves get calm as quickly as the story says. But the idea of Jesus making that happen – and walking on top of the water – and asking Peter to do the same, well, yea, that’s a bit too much.

It wasn’t until Jesus came to him after the Resurrection that Peter got the whole of who Jesus was. And then there was no stopping him from proclaiming God and Jesus to all who he could find. His rope to God was now strong enough to carry him over the precipice.

Peter and the apostles showed us a human side of God, just like the people before them back to Abraham. A God who would talk to normal humans and work with them here on earth. But now God was even more personal, being a person himself.

All of this is what we declare at Baptism, with the Apostle’s Creed.

When we promise to have an active worship and prayer life, we become aware of God in our daily routine. And from that our promise to serve others, be stewards of our gifts and God’s creation, and our spreading the word of God to others becomes easy.

We receive a letter from someone far away, we get a phone call with a great suggestion, coincidences just happen. How do we react? With a rope of faith that resembles the tie for a box?

We receive bad luck. We become the victim of abuse or lack of success. We suffer from pain or watch those around us suffer. How do we react? Can we see that rope of faith like a lifeline that takes us over the precipice?

Baptism is our rope. We renew it and strengthen it with each prayer and each time we share the Eucharistic celebration of Jesus life, death and resurrection.

And with that we welcome the newest member of Christ’s family and ours.