

(Joshua 4:1-7 NRSV)

¹ When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: ² "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³ and command them, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.'" ⁴ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. ⁵ Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' ⁷ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever."

(Matthew 14:22-33 NRSV)

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

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Float Like a Rock

A sermon preached at Church of the Covenant, Cambridge, Massachusetts on the occasion of Holly Cameron's Commissioning.

Date: May 31, 1998

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Joshua 4:1-7; Matthew 14:22-33

Krister Stendahl, former dean at Harvard Divinity School, former Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, Sweden, and renowned teacher of the Bible and preaching has put together ten commandments for preachers. I regularly break them, and I intend to this afternoon.

Krister's number one commandment is don't start with stories. If the story is good, no one will remember the sermon. If the story is bad, I guess they won't remember either the story or the sermon. But I am taking the risk this afternoon, and I'm telling a story, a story about Krister himself. It points to the point of the sermon, so listen for that and maybe remember it, and perhaps we'll prove Krister wrong.

Thirty years ago or so Krister preached the ordination sermon for the first woman ordained in the American Lutheran Church, Connie Parvey. In an effort to appropriately mark this moment of leveling the field, Krister decided to come out of the pulpit and preach at floor level, and without a manuscript or notes. The day was Palm Sunday, and of course the Gospel text told the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. Krister began in his usual exegetical fashion. He said, "You know Connie, there is much of importance for ministry in this story, and some of it usually goes unnoticed. Everyone pays attention to Jesus and his coming into Jerusalem for his last week, for the week of Passion. And of course, Connie, this is important.

"But there is another important thing. Jesus had to get into the city. He had to be transported. We read that he was carried on the back of an ass. He was carried into the city on the back of an ass. The ass doesn't get much attention, Connie, but that's how Jesus got into the city. Do you see what I mean, Connie? You, Connie, are that ass."

Caught in the thunderous laughter, and its following embarrassment, without the benefit of either pulpit to hold onto or notes to refer to, poor Krister's attempts to escape his metaphor only got him into further trouble.

I don't recall exactly how the story or the sermon ended, which is perhaps the origin of Krister's prohibition on stories. But despite the faux pas, Krister's point

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was well enough taken. And from him I will take my cue, Holly, to find your analogue in this morning's Gospel.

The choice in this story is obvious. The story of the disciples caught in the storm and of Jesus walking on the water to their rescue is found also in Luke and John. But it is not accidental that only in Matthew are we told of Peter's walking out to meet Jesus. Only in Matthew, known as the Gospel of the Jerusalem church, only in Matthew, the Gospel in which Jesus leaves the legacy of the church squarely on the shoulders of Peter, only in Matthew, does Peter get out of the boat and take at least a few steps on the water.

Now Holly, you know I am a Congregationalist, not so very far in our understanding of things from you Presbyterians. You know that Congregationalists are by nature democratic. And you also know that at Harvard Divinity School, where you and I both have a connection, egalitarianism is a religion. But ministry also requires leadership. In the Gospel of Matthew it is no accident that Peter, whom Jesus chooses to lead the church, takes his turn at trying to walk on water. And I want to say, Holly, that no matter how non-hierarchical, collaborative and congenial you are as a minister, you have a lot in common with Peter as you take up this mantle of church ministry. It is a mantle of leadership.

The boat of the church finds itself often in rough waters. The Buddha's maledictions of sickness, old age, and death are but three of the terrors your people know. Sometimes the trouble is so turbulent that even the risen Christ may seem but a frightening ghost, mocking them as apparition on the stormy waters.

In these times when the sea rolls, Holly, your people will hope for an advocate. Afraid, afraid even of their own faith, fearing it to be but a phantom, they will hope for one who will cry out and challenge God on their behalf, one who will say, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." They will hope for one who will hear God call out to her in response to the challenge. They will hope for one who will start walking out onto the fearsome sea. To paraphrase Krister Stendahl's words to Connie Parvey, Holly, you are that person; you are Peter in this story.

Is this a heavy burden? In a way, of course it is. But, remember, they don't so much need you so much to walk on water as to be willing to try. Risking your faith is perhaps a better lesson than working miracles. Indeed, risking your faith, sinking nonetheless, and then, finally being saved by God yourself is far more honest a ministry, and far more helpful an example, I should think.

But this ministry, this ministry of taking your leadership seriously, of risking your faith, of failing and being saved, all in public, is fraught with danger and temptation. It can fall prey to the spotlight. It can all too easily become all about you and too little about either the people of the church or about God or about what God wants of either of you.

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When I was a young boy I used to love to sit on my grandmother's lap while she told me of growing up on the hill farms of western Massachusetts in the early part of this century. One of the stories that caught my imagination was of the winter road by the old farm house. In those days most of the roads were dirt, and most of the transportation by horses. So, they didn't plow the roads. Rather they rolled them with huge weighted rollers drawn by great farm draft horses. Gramma told how they would roll the snow into a hard-pack on the road by the house, and then the sleighs could easily be drawn over it. Whenever my grandmother told me of this, it created a wonderfully romantic image in my mind, a Norman Rockwell painting.

But then Gramma would tell me about spring, and mud-season. Any of you acquainted with rural New England know that mud-season even now can be a severe challenge of deep ruts in a bottomless goo. Imagine if you had a winter's hard-pack melting and adding itself to the soup. Gramma always liked to tell me stories because I would ask the right question right on cue: "Well what did they do in mud season, Gramma? Didn't the wagons all get stuck in the mire?" And then Gramma would tell me how her father and the other farmers hauled huge boulders and threw them into the road bed to solidify the road. Over time, the road became filled with enough enormous stones that it functioned pretty well, even in mud season.

That is, it functioned pretty well until a later time when the road had become paved. Now that the road had a hard-top surface and was plowed, the big stones moving around in the underlayment were a nuisance. If you have a garden, you know how stones keep coming to the surface, no matter how many you remove. So, now the big stones under the pavement would shove each other, move around, and work themselves to the surface. The pavement ended up with a surface akin to peanut brittle. The stones had once helped cope with a problem. Now, they had become a problem. The stones which had helped make the surface passable, now made it nearly unnegotiable.

Ultimately, the stones had to be dug out of the road. It was a lot of work, heavy digging, but at last they lay at its edge, reminders of purpose they had once served, and, reminders of how, more recently, they had become a hindrance to the very purpose they had been meant to serve.

Israel crossed the Jordan after forty years in the wilderness. Like the Red Sea, the Jordan parted to give them dry passage. God told Joshua to command twelve people, one from each of the twelve tribes, to take twelve stones taken from the middle of the dry riverbed and to place them where they camped on the other side. That's all God said. But Joshua interpreted the meaning for the people. He said that the stones would be a memorial. He said that when later generations asked their meaning, the people should say that they are reminders that the waters

parted for the Ark of the Covenant to pass on dry ground. They were to be memorial to that proud moment of occupation, said Joshua.

But I wonder if God were interpreting their meaning, God might have said more. Perhaps, along with reminding them of the moment they entered the land with the waters parted, the pile of twelve stones might have reminded them of their grumbling, complaining and stiff-neckedness in the wilderness. It might have reminded them of the golden calf. It might have reminded them of their faithlessness about the manna and the water. And it might have reminded them that many of the behaviors, beliefs and coping mechanisms that got them to where they were, were nonetheless suspect.

I don't want to push the analogy to the breaking point, but I am certain that God meant the pile of stones to witness to the whole truth of the people Israel, some parts of which were more flattering than others. And to the extent the stones witnessed to the whole of the truth, their presence would have been the result of a painful extraction from the depths of their being and an ability to look their whole selves in the face.

It is no secret that all of us carry the baggage of old coping mechanisms, old behaviors that fail to flatter us, old beliefs that serve us ill. It is an impossible project to remove them entirely out of view. But it is quite possible, though painful and difficult, to dig them out and lay them next to the road or on the river bank. And that is a good thing to do, for, otherwise, they are a great weight for us to carry around.

And you, Holly, you who are to be Peter, trying to respond to God by doing a little walking on water, well, you will be better off the fewer old heavy stones you carry around buried in your mid-section. Better that they be dug out and laid up off to the side where you can see them, where they can be your memory, where they can be your warning beacons, where they can be your compass and your rule. For even then, you will many times sink like Peter and need God to save you. But your effort and your faith will be honest and true. And those in the boat will know that. They will see it. And perhaps, even when the boat is battered by the waves and the wind is running strong against them and even their God seems a fearsome apparition, they will step out onto the water, in part, because you have dared to and have shown them the way with a palpable integrity.

Holly, God bless you and keep you. God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. God look upon you with kindness and give you peace. Amen.

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