

## WAIT FOR JESUS

One of my favorite books is *The World According to Garp* by John Irving. The Garp family lived near the beach, and whenever the children would go out for a swim the parents would warn them, “Now, you watch out for the undertow.”

Living near the ocean ourselves, we know what that means, right? The current underneath the waves can unexpectedly grab hold of you and carry you out to sea. Anyway, “Watch out for the undertow” was the incessant parental warning in the Garp family.

One day the youngest member of the Garp family was seen walking around on the rocks and pools near the ocean, intently searching for something. “What are you looking for?” his parents asked.

“I’m looking for the undertoad,” he replied.

The “undertoad.” The little boy had thought, when he was being warned, that there was some kind of slimy oceanic beast beneath the sea, just waiting to snatch him and drag him under.

The dreaded and dangerous “undertoad.”

Eventually, said Garp, it became sort of an inside joke that whenever any member of his family ventured out, not into the ocean, but into any risky and challenging venture, they would say, “Now, watch out for the undertoad!”

The “undertoad” of life is that strange, never actually seen beast that unexpectedly snatches us from our normal existence and pulls us down under the waves and into the sea of trouble and despair. One minute we’re in calm waters, floating along nicely, and then, suddenly, the “undertoad” strikes.

I’ve been in a few automobile accidents (it hasn’t happened recently!).

Thankfully, none of the collisions were serious and no one was injured. But when I think back on those events, it reminds me of how fragile life can be.

There I was behind the wheel, everything going along just fine; and then a car appears from out of nowhere and—CRASH!—everything is changed in an instant.

I think we often delude ourselves into believing that life and our existence

is a lot more predictable and safe than it really is. That darn undertoad keeps it from being that way. The undertoad makes life unpredictable and uncertain . . . and sometimes scary.

In this morning's gospel reading, the disciple Peter found himself in the middle of an undertoad—an undertoad of his own making. He and the other disciples were in a boat, out on the volatile and sometimes dangerous Sea of Galilee, on a dark and stormy night. They looked over and, wonder of wonders, there was Jesus, walking on the water. No surf board; no emergency floatation device; no galoshes on his feet. Just Jesus out for a stroll on top of the waves.

Now, for those of you who have difficulty taking this story literally, keep in mind that by this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had already been revealed to be somebody special: a healer and a demon slayer, the Son of Man who was sent by God to announce the coming of God's Kingdom. This walking-on-water event was just one more way for Matthew to tell his readers in a dramatic fashion, "Pay attention to this guy! Listen closely to what he has to say, because he speaks and acts for God Himself."

But if you think Jesus walking on water is strange, that's nothing compared to the really bizarre and astonishing thing that happened next. Peter, that good old impulsive, impetuous, spontaneous disciple of Jesus, decided he wanted to try it, too. And he yelled, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Well, it was Jesus, and Jesus did invite Peter. "Come on in, the water's fine!" And Peter recklessly and irrationally ventured out of the boat.

Now, it's one thing to be grabbed unexpectedly by the undertoad and pulled beneath the waves; but to knowingly and deliberately wander out onto the water and literally invite the undertoad to grab you and drag you under . . . well, let's just say this wasn't the most logical decision Peter made in his life.

But Peter had faith! He trusted Jesus enough to hop out of the boat in the middle of a storm—right into the waiting arms of the dangerous undertoad. Yes, Peter had faith—even if it might be considered reckless and foolhardy faith. But it also seems that he didn't have quite enough faith to stay afloat. So he started to sink. Matthew may have given us a clue that Peter's faith wasn't going to be strong enough to take on the undertoad when he first called out to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

If it is you. Lord, if you are the Son of God and can do anything for us that we ask, prove it to me. I want to see how much of a Son of God you really are. And maybe Peter was also saying, "Lord, I want to be the top dog on your team, the premier disciple, just like you said; so let's show everybody how special I am by keeping me safe on the waves. Demonstrate that I'm the rock of the church;

that I'm better than the rest of them; that the rules of life and physics don't apply to me and the undertoad can't hurt me because I'm a great and faithful disciple."

The entertaining and sometimes humorous thing about the disciple Peter is that he almost inevitably tends to blurt out the wrong thing at the wrong time. But honestly, don't we love him for that? Don't we have a great deal of fondness and affection for Peter because he's so . . . human? And because so often he speaks for us and says things to Jesus and does things for Jesus that we ourselves would probably say and do if we were one of the original disciples? Does this sound familiar? "Lord, I have served you for many years and have tried to live a good life, so keep the undertoad of illness away from me. So show me how much you love me and how pleased you are with the things I've done by allowing me to escape the life-threatening sicknesses that strike other people."

Or, "Lord, since I've made the effort to come here to church—and in the middle of summer, no less—give me an indisputable sign that you really are who the church claims you to be."

Or, "Lord, I want to be a hero for you. Let me show the world how good I am at believing. Watch me now as I step out onto the waves. And allow me to glide across the water unharmed, untouched by the bad things in life, safe from the clutches of the undertoad. Because I want to be a super Christian!"

You know, when Peter cried out to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water," Jesus would have been totally justified in saying, "Peter, sit down and shut up. You're embarrassing yourself. You're not as special as you think, so forget the heroics and get back in the boat."

Of course, Jesus didn't do that. Instead, he invited Peter to take a great and life-threatening risk by stepping out onto the rough-and-tumble sea. Maybe that's because Jesus knew it was what Peter needed. Maybe Jesus called over to Peter and allowed him to venture out of the boat just so he could flounder around and begin to sink the way he did. Maybe what Jesus wanted to hear from Peter all along wasn't, "Lord, here I am, Super Christian, walking on the water on my way to you!" but "Lord, I'm sinking! The undertoad has me! What am I doing out here? I've made a stupid mistake! Please save me before I go down for the third time!"

As we all know, Jesus did save Peter from the undertoad; but then he had a blunt comment to make. "You of little faith." Interestingly, the Greek words we read as, "You of little faith" are literally translated, "O Little Faith." It's as if Jesus renamed Peter again, after previously calling him "Rock." And, in a sense, Peter was in danger of sinking like a rock, although I'm sure that's not what

Jesus had in mind when he called him “Rock.”

“O Little Faith, why did you doubt?”

As I was reflecting on today’s Gospel reading so I could write this sermon, it came to me that Peter’s doubt began even before he stepped out of the boat. I think Peter’s doubt actually began, not when he attempted to walk on the water but when he first heard the wind howling and felt the waves crashing against the boat. I think Peter’s doubt started to leak out in his bold request to Jesus: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” I can hear the uncertainty in Peter’s voice.

So maybe Jesus, after pulling a drenched, half-drowned Peter out of the water, was really saying to him, “O Little Faith, why didn’t you wait for me? Why couldn’t you trust in me enough to stay seated in the boat with the others and let me come to you in my own good time? Haven’t you been with me long enough to know that I will care for you and love you in the midst of any raging storm? You didn’t need to rush over to me. All you had to do was wait in the boat and have faith that I would come to you.”

There are Christians who, when they’re faced with some kind of intense storm in their life, confidently say, “All you need to do have faith!” But they go a step beyond and tempt fate by heroically venturing out of the boat and into the wild and windy sea, believing that Jesus will take care of them if trouble should strike. But maybe one of the most powerful expressions of faith, deep faith, is the calm, trusting conviction that enables us to stay in the boat, even when there’s a storm raging around us, because we don’t need to walk on water to go to Jesus. Rather, in good time, whatever might happen, Jesus will come to us.

At this point in Matthew’s Gospel, there had been numerous stories recording Jesus’ miraculous healings and exorcising of demons; and the disciples were impressed by what Jesus had done. But in the Gospel story we read today, it’s the first time the disciples truly had their eyes opened, said “Aha!” and actually worshipped.

When Jesus got into the boat with them, they felt a great sense of peace and were able to say with one voice, “Truly you are the Son of God!” That’s the kind of moment we Christians yearn to come to, isn’t it? When Jesus reveals his power to us in an undeniable way, every doubt we have is erased, and we can say with conviction, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Maybe some of us have already had such a sacred and holy moment in life; and maybe some of us are still waiting for one. But either way, there will be times in the future when the storms of life threaten us and we find ourselves praying for Jesus to come and help us.

When those times do happen, hopefully we won’t make Peter’s mistake

mistake and rush into the eye of the raging storm to get to Jesus, when Jesus is already on his way to us. Not that our Lord won't reach out his hand and grab us to keep us from sinking if we do hop out onto the water to go to him, because I believe he will.

But maybe sometimes the best, most faithful thing we can do when the storm is howling and the undertoad threatens, is to hold on tight, remain in the boat, and prayerfully wait for Jesus to reach us. Because our Lord wants us to trust his promise that he is on the way and will come to us in our times of need.

Thanks be to God. Amen.