Any Charlie Brown fans here? Charlie Brown goes to Lucy for a nickels worth of psychiatric help. She pinpoints his fear. Perhaps, she says, you have hypencyophobia, which is the fear of responsibility. Charlie Brown says no. Well, perhaps you have ailurophobia, which is the fear of cats. No. Well, maybe you have climacophobia, which is the fear of staircases. No. Finally, Lucy says maybe you have pantophobia, which is the fear of everything. Yes, says Charles, that is the one!

Fear. Fear of walking on water. The first century Christians knew that the trick was not the literal walking on the water but the much harder act of walking in faith in the middle of fear. In telling this morning’s story, Matthew’s Gospel stresses the disciples’ fear more than the same story told by either Mark or John. The part of the story where Peter walks on water to meet Jesus is unique to Matthew. Peter is a living example of the struggle between faith and unbelief. Maybe, just maybe, you have experienced a little of Peter in your own life. Can’t you hear Peter’s inner monologue? “If Jesus calls me, I can do anything. What is a little water?” And then the telling line: But when Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened and he began to sink. Peter got caught in his own self-doubt and down he went. Confronted with the power larger than himself, Peter, probably like all of us in this room, can be terrified.

Perhaps some of you have a Bible with titles to identify the stories. This morning’s Gospel is usually called “Jesus Walks on Water.” This title may help us find the text but I think it misleads. It could just as well be “Peter Sinks.” I don’t think this text is about Jesus’ power over the natural world but about the battle for belief within the disciples themselves. It is about the fear of walking out into the unknown. And, of course, the scene is addressed to the needs of Matthew’s community, and it stretches over the centuries to meet our own needs.

What was going on in the early community that was so fearful to its members? They were moving from the known to the unknown. “Crossing to the other side of the lake” is Matthew’s way of saying that Jesus, and later his disciples, were taking the Gospel to the place beyond their community of mostly Jewish Christians. The eastern side of the lake is the other side from where Peter lives. It is the side where the Gentiles
are, so they were going into the unknown. In his mission of spreading the Gospel, the community for whom Matthew writes experiences all the conflict that any outreach can take. Putting faith in Jesus puts the Jewish Christians into conflict with family members who don’t follow Jesus. Second, bringing in Gentile believers brings in all kinds of tensions and questions. Do these converts have to follow all the Jewish laws? A third reason for unrest is that Matthew’s community is fearing persecution from the outside.

So where was Jesus when the disciples were feeling so desperate? Matthew describes that wonderful exchange between Peter and Jesus. First, let’s picture the setting. Night is breaking, and the first light is rising. This can be a time when fear can break in. Have you ever experienced the wave of fear that can move between light and dark? The time between sleep and wakefulness, that time in the morning when all is quiet, a time when you may be conscious that all is not right with the oncoming day. Well, this is the time when Peter cries out, “Lord, save me!” And the word in the Gospel says, “Immediately, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him.” Can’t you feel the energy in that movement?

Poor Peter often gets tagged as the one who has no faith. But I would say just the opposite. Peter is the only disciple who moves towards Jesus, the only one who dares to get out of the boat and walk on water. He leaves the other disciples, his friends, his community; he walks out. He walks boldly. And he falters. And he alone is the disciple who leaves the boat. He alone is the disciple who reenters the boat in the hands of Jesus. Jesus and Peter enter that boat together. What would you give to do that? Would you walk on water? Would you walk into your own fear?

Suppose what you fear could be trapped and held in Sequim. Then you would have the courage to go everywhere in the world, all the directions of the compass open to you, except the degrees east or west of true north that lead to Sequim. Still, you wouldn’t dare put your toes smack dab on the city limit. Just to be on the safe side, you will probably decide to move out of the state of Washington. But even then, the State of Washington is still in the United States of America, so maybe you ought to move to another part of the globe. But then the danger can still seem
too close: we do have airplanes, and that timid part of yourself can begin to feel the fear covering the whole globe again. Then what you need most, over anything in the whole world, is a very good friend who learns your secret and says, “Return to Sequim.”

Now wasn’t that the kind of friend that Jesus was for Peter? “Come,” Jesus says, “take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.” The wonderful thing is that Peter can walk on water. He really can! And so can you and I. The point is to get out of the boat to walk into the fear. See Sequim!

The events of this weekend have pushed my memory back to times when we individually or as a nation have been strong enough to walk into water. My husband, Wray, was one of the clergy who responded to Martin Luther King’s plea to walk with him in Selma. The goal was to gain voting rights for blacks. King stated that more people were marching than the number of blacks who had the right to vote. Years later, Wray asked me to reenact the same walk with him. Moment by moment Wray told me what had occurred on the original march.

Before the march, King said: “Before the victory's won, some like a Medgar Evers, like a Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, like a Rev. James Reeb, like a Jimmie Lee Jackson, may have to face physical death .... (if) the physical death is a price that some must pay to free their children and their white brothers from an eternal death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.”

This was the background before the march...the march was over a bridge. Built in 1940, the Edmund Pettus bridge connected Selma to Montgomery. As protesters marched from one county to the other, they crossed a bridge named after Civil War Confederate general Edmund Pettus, who later became Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama. The bridge went over the Alabama River before it reached Montgomery. The marchers had to march twice. The first time they were stopped by state troopers. The marchers came back. They marched over water.

When I walked the bridge with Wray I was astonished to see the Confederate flag on the Capitol. But Wray said the power was in the people. Each person held an American flag and waved it after crossing the bridge.

Five months later, President Johnson signed into law the voting
rights act. Of course, the black community had been given the right to vote after the Civil war. But the new act would cut out fear of discrimination while voting. The community could walk on water.

When we walk into our fear, God is there. In Matthew’s community, God was there. In our darkest moment, that is where faith makes the most sense. Of course, that is the paradox. When have you found yourself needing to turn back to Jesus or to the Gospel, to clarify and fortify yourself for the way ahead? What moments can you identify when you have come to a broader or fuller understanding of faith, or a deeper realization of God’s love for you, being held in the hand of God?

As in any good Gospel story, this one does not end with the individual. The boat holds the whole community, all the disciples, each with a different degree of faith, each with a fear of walking on water. But it is in the midst of the water and the wind that Jesus comes to all of them. It is in the middle of the challenge that they acclaim Jesus as God’s son.

There is a blessing from India that goes like this. Perhaps the best way to hear this is to close your eyes and have this blessing wash over you.

“As heaven and earth are not afraid, and never suffer loss or harm, even so, my spirit, fear not thou.

As day and night are not afraid, and never suffer loss or harm, even so, my spirit, fear not thou.

As sun and moon are not afraid, or ever suffer loss or harm, even so, my spirit, fear not thou.

As princely powers fear not, nor suffer loss or harm, even so, my spirit, fear not thou.

As truth and falsehood have no fear,
nor ever suffer loss or harm, even so, my spirit, fear not thou. 
As what hath been and what shall be fear not, nor suffer loss or harm, 
even so, my spirit, fear not thou.”

Indeed, there is something greater than the wind, greater than the 
raging sea, greater than the doubt that Peter or Matthew’s community, or 
that even we can muster up, and it is the loving hand that God extends to 
us. We cannot always keep the boat upright. We are not even saved by 
walking on water. We are saved by the Holy One whose hand catches us, 
whose eyes watch over us through the night, who comes to us in the 
deep, catches us when we are sinking. For faith knows who is powerful 
over the deep of our fears, over the deep of the waters. Even so, my 
spirit, fear not thou.