

The preacher George Buttrick was once on an airplane headed home from a conference. During the flight he pulled out a notepad to work on Sunday's sermon. After a few minutes the man sitting next to him spoke up.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," he said,
"but I can see how hard you're working and I just have to ask:
what are you doing?"

"I'm a minister," Buttrick replied,
"and I'm writing my sermon for Sunday."

"Ah, religion," said the man.

"I can't say I'm much into the complexities of religion myself.

'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' —
the Golden Rule.

That's about all the religion I need."

"I see," said Buttrick. "And what do you do?"

"I'm an astronomy professor," said the man. "I teach at the university."

"Ah, astronomy," said Buttrick. "I can't say I know much about
the complexities of astronomy.

'Twinkle, twinkle little star'--that's about all the astronomy I need."

In just about every sphere of life —

from relationships to politics to science to religion —

we are tempted to reduce complex concepts to simple ideas
that are easier for us to grasp.

We long to break things down into the lowest common denominator
that we can either accept or reject.

Something about being human makes us prone to categorize,
compartmentalize and stereotype. We LONG for certainty.

Can you think of a time when you were certain you understood
something or someone?

When you really thought you had figured out what this person
or organization or idea was all about?

But then, your sense of certainty was called into question?

It's not a great feeling, is it? It's disorienting and disappointing.

And yet, if the stories of our tradition teach us anything,

it's that it is when we admit and even embrace ***uncertainty***
that God begins the hard, but important work of transforming us.

Not long after my friend Samantha graduated from seminary
in New York City and accepted a call to a church in Asheville
that was committed to social justice,
she took a trip to New Orleans with some friends.
They marveled at the way this city brings together
a wild mix of cultures –
French, Cajun, African, Spanish, English –
welcoming all kinds of people as they are.

One day, Samantha and her friends embarked
on a self-guided walking tour of some of the city's historic houses.

They came upon a beautiful yellow
mansion which had a sign in front identifying it as an inn.

They began talking to the manager of the inn,
and Samantha asked him, "Who used to own this house?"

"It was owned by a Presbyterian minister," the man replied.

Samantha's face lit up.

"Really?" she said.

"Actually, *I'm* a Presbyterian minister."

"Is that right?" the man said. "Well, that guy's name was
the Reverend Benjamin Palmer...."

and he was a big **racist**.

In fact, they say his Thanksgiving sermon inspired
the state of Louisiana to break away from the Union.”

“Huh,” Samantha said.

“Did I say I was a *Presbyterian* minister?”

What she wanted in that moment was to become invisible.

She had been so certain of what it meant to be a minister,
a follower of Jesus Christ, and she left
deeply unsettled by the realization
that someone with the title of Reverend would
perpetuate injustice and suffering
rather than work to eliminate it.

At the beginning of this passage, Jesus doesn't just INVITE the disciples
to take a boat across a sea
that was notorious for getting swept up in sudden storms;
he MAKES them to go —
the Greek word here could be translated,
he COMPELS them.

And they aren't going home or to a familiar vacation spot;

he sends them “to the other side” —

to an unfamiliar place,

to a people they don’t know,

to a destination that was not particularly appealing.

But they go, and, sure enough, a storm kicks up.

This isn’t so unusual, and it seems these

experienced fishermen can handle the storm,

but the wind prevents them from getting to shore.

Early the next morning, when they are

physically and emotionally exhausted,

they see someone walking toward them on the water.

They can only assume it is a ghost,

and THAT is what terrifies them:

the UNCERTAINTY

of who this could be and what this could mean.

But then Jesus calls out to them — *take heart, it’s just me!*

And you can imagine their collective sigh of relief...

But Jesus’ words are not enough reassurance for Peter.

Remember *Peter*?

Eager, impetuous Peter,

the disciple who always forgets to raise his hand
before blurting out the answer to Jesus's
every question.

This moment is no different. Peter doesn't hesitate:

"If it's you, Jesus, command me to come to you on the water."

In the midst of fear and uncertainty,

Peter seems to think the way to find out for sure

if this specter walking on water really is Jesus

is to see if he will invite Peter

to leave the relative safety of the

boat and come closer toward him across the stormy waves.

When I was a kid, back in the early 80's, my favorite equipment

on the playground was the monkey bars —

those bars like a horizontal ladder that you would

hang from and propel yourself across, taking one bar

in one hand at a time.

As much as I enjoyed the monkey bars,

it took me a while to master them.

Over and over again, I'd hang from that first bar

and try to propel myself forward without falling to the ground.

I did fall, a lot. But I kept trying until, one day, I could do it:
I could start at one end and get all the way across without falling.

Have you noticed that newer playgrounds

don't have monkey bars anymore. Or seesaws.

And the slides aren't as high as they used to be.

These "safety-first" playgrounds are built on soft surfaces —

not concrete or asphalt — but wood chips

or that spongy stuff made from recycled tires.

No more asphalt landings or skinned knees.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to keep our children

safe on the playground. But studies have shown

that when we make an environment *too* safe,

when we make it *too* easy,

children don't have the chance to take risks, to push themselves to —

literally — new heights.

And as hard as it is for us to let the children in our lives take risks,

to feel pain, and to fail, it is only when children face their fears

that they find out they can handle adversity.

It is only when they take risks that they discover their capacity
for resilience, problem-solving, and self-reliance.

It is only when they take on a challenge
that they discover that rising to a challenge
can itself be incredibly satisfying.

As a commencement speaker once said

to the graduates of Ohio University,

“Developing a skill is painful...it is difficult.

And that’s part of the satisfaction.

You will only find meaning in what you struggle with.”

You will only find MEANING in what you struggle with.

Peter, it seems, has absorbed on this message,

which is one Jesus preaches often — sometimes with subtlety,

like in a parable about the challenges of getting

seed to bear fruit; other times more directly

with words like, *whoever wants to save her life will lose it,*

or pick up your cross and follow me.

Peter has learned that to follow Jesus is to embrace the discomfort
and struggle that comes with confronting uncertainty.

Like Peter, sooner or later on the journey of faith,
we will discover that anything worth having

is going to cost us something,

whether that something is

money

time

energy

even our sense of safety, security, and certainty.

Like Peter, we will discover that to take the next step

toward Jesus, we will have to leave

the relative safety of the boat.

A pastor friend of mine likes to say that it is her job as a minister

to help the members of her church hit their mid-life crisis

as EARLY in life as possible,

because this crisis creates the kind of openness and

receptivity to God that few other things can.

A mid-life crisis is a moment when what we thought was certain

is suddenly thrown into question —

whether the crisis is one of vocation or values
or relationship or identity.

It is the kind of moment the disciples experienced when,
in the midst of an overwhelming storm,

Jesus approached them in a whole new way.

And it is this kind of uncertainty that can open us up

to the transformative work of God,

that can inspire us to draw closer to God...

and discover, not only who God is,

but what we are capable of

when we draw near to God.

When Peter asks Jesus to command him to get out of the boat

and walk on water, it's because he has learned

that this is how we recognize God at work:

God is the one who disrupts our usual ways of

thinking and being and doing

to transform our understanding of who we are

and what we are capable of.

And sure enough, it works – for a moment, Peter walks on water!

But when Peter gets distracted by the storm

and begins to sink, notice:

he doesn't turn and swim back for the boat,

he doesn't just disappear under the waves,

he cries out to Jesus: "Lord, save me!"

He keeps his eyes on Jesus.

The cycle of faith is clear: invitation, disruption, transformation,

and then the realization that we don't have

to ride the boat

to weather the storm

or to walk on water

ALONE.

Yes, it is God who will disrupt us

by calling into question everything about which we are certain.

It is God who will command us to leave

the safety of the boat

and get up close and personal with the storm.

But God is also with us — in every single moment —

close enough that even when we come face to face
with uncertainty that unravels everything we thought
we knew, that is very place we will see God,
who offers us, not the comfort of certainty,
but wonder and mercy and love —
enough to get us through any storm.

Amen.

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