INTRO: LEARNING TO WALK...AT FIRST

I want to offer an analogy to help you analyze the truth of this morning’s gospel reading. The analogy involves the process of learning to walk. Which is one of the most exciting and memorable milestones in a child’s development.

Whether you have personally been a parent (or grandparent) or not, you have seen how it happens that a precious armful of joy soon becomes a mobile force of nature. Also...you were a child once. So, the analogy is, hopefully, inclusive and relatable. Anyway, I’m probably embellishing and omitting some stuff; but here’s what I remember about my children learning to walk:

I remember that there were stages – the **scooting** around on his backside stage; the **crawling** on his hands and knees stage; the **cruising** stage where your little one learns to pull himself up and hold onto furniture in order to get from here to there; the stage when she learns about **standing**, hands-free; and the culminating stage where she amazingly (adventurously) puts one foot in front of the other! Even if it looks wobbly and clumsy, baby, she is walking!

And when you witness that moment, you are filled with awe and wonder. It is one of the most exciting and memorable milestones in life. Taking those first few
steps is a truly miraculous achievement! Surely you have seen it for yourself and been moved to amazement!

Now, in the midst of your marveling, have you ever noticed that a curious thing also happens when little ones are learning to walk? What I remember is that, during the standing up and stepping out phases, my children were sometimes overcome with hesitation or doubt or disbelief and, suddenly, fell flat on their fannies.

In one instant, Nate would be standing there beaming with confidence in his leg bones and ligaments: “I’ve got this. Watch me, dad!” And then, in the very next moment, there was a look of terrified surprise on his face as though his body and brain and his sense of balance had all betrayed him: “I’m going down. Catch me, dad!”

I would often wonder, sympathetically, what that felt like – what intervening emotion caused that kind of interruption. I said all of that to say that I don’t think we ever fully outlive that phenomenon or out grow that feeling – that sinking feeling. “Catch me, somebody! Lord, save me.” It goes with us as we get older. It reappears again and again as we go on making strides to deepen our faith.

I’d like you to meet me at the place where the text and the topic of learning to walk collide. I have entitled my reflection: **That Sinking Feeling.**
Before I get into the lesson that the text teaches, I want to briefly say something about the location. We visited the Sea of Galilee during our Holy Land pilgrimage back in February.

Though it was one of the highpoints of my pilgrimage, it is the lowest lying fresh water lake on the planet at 686 feet below sea level. This is significant to understand because the fact that the lake is situated in a valley and surrounded by hills means that the Sea of Galilee is prone to sudden storms. With little warning, the winds can descend and whip across the serene surface of the water producing treacherous waves. That undeniable meteorological reality is present in the text whether you believe that the Savior walked upon the water or not.

Back in April, I wrote a pastoral missive based on another gospel account where Jesus is reported to have calmed these same waters – he rebuked the winds and the raging waves. You might recall that I attached a short video recorded while aboard a boat on the lake. I did not mention, though, that I also recorded my heart rate during the course of that water voyage. It was something like 57-58 beats per minute – well below my usual resting rate.
Which is significant because I had a sense then and since that there is something extraordinary (miraculous) about the Sea of Galilee and its shores where Jesus called the first disciples, and preached truth, and cured sicknesses, and fed five thousand souls. The mythology has more personal meaning for me because I’ve been there and felt an unmistakable power and an unusual presence.

I don’t know if Jesus literally defied gravity in the first century. I do believe that today we’re still in the same boat with the earliest disciples...tormented by ghosts, battered by the waves, sometimes far from dry land, the winds against us...terrified at times. Still. Today.

I can see Jesus coming toward us over the tumult. I can hear him speaking softly, tenderly: “Take heart. Do not be afraid.”

LEARNING TO WALK...IN FAITH

This is where the lesson begins -- where Peter answers: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” If the Chalice hymnal had been available, Peter might have said: “I am weak, but thou art strong; Jesus, keep me from all wrong; I’ll be satisfied as long as I walk, let me walk close to thee.”

Jesus said, “Come.” And since he inspired the song that the African slaves sang, Jesus could have said: “Wade in the water, child. If you don’t believe I’ve been

1 Just a Closer Walk with Thee; Chalice Hymn #557.
redeemed, God’s a-going to trouble the water; just follow me down to Jordan’s stream.²"

Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and drew closer toward Jesus. “I’ve got this!” Taking those first few steps is a truly miraculous achievement! Surely you have seen it for yourself and been moved to amazement! BUT. When he noticed the strong wind, Peter became frightened.

Have you ever noticed that a curious thing also happens when little ones are learning to walk? What I remember is that, during the standing up and stepping out phases, my children were sometimes be overcome by hesitation or doubt or disbelief and, suddenly, would fall flat on their fannies.

And beginning to sink, Peter cried out, “I’m going down! Catch me, Lord!” I’ve been in the text the entire time...trying to talk about that sinking feeling. Is it the result of weakness of character? Does it indicate emotional or mental fragility? Is it a fatal failing? Can you overcome it? The short answers to those questions, in order, are: No. No. No. Yes!

When you are learning to walk -- at first and later in faith -- you can be confident in one instant and confused in the next instant. With little warning, the winds can descend and whip across the serene surface of the water producing treacherous

² Wade in the Water; Chalice Hymn #371.
waves that threaten to swamp your boat.

Those are the times when you may notice that nonessential concerns are clamoring for attention, though they don't deserve your energy. You may find yourself distracted by silly and superfluous details that can drive you out of your right mind. You might experience a loss of power and purpose as you allow unimportant matters to separate you from the light and love of God. That is the nature of the sinking feeling. “Lord, save me!”

Let me make a few simple suggestions for those complicated times when that feeling crowds around and you are tempted to watch the waves rather than walk in the way:

1. **Try to practice being comfortable in uncomfortable situations.** The sinking feeling often arises, for me, when I’m faced with something I haven’t seen before…when I’m in unfamiliar territory. Which is the case every 12 hours in this pandemic wilderness. I want to revert. I want to retreat. I want to resist. I would prefer to be comfortable than adaptable.

Yet, these difficult days require ordinary people to make extraordinary sacrifices and stretch beyond limitation and doubt. This present atmosphere of unrest and protest has necessitated some uncomfortable conversations. I will acknowledge that it is hard to put one foot in front of the other let alone run the race. Still, I’m finding that the principles and precepts of our faith -- patience, persistence, loving
kindness, forgiveness, and justice -- are reliable and applicable even when faced with unprecedented, incomparable circumstances. I’m working on it. Practice makes for progress.

2. **Don’t let the possibility of failing or falling down prevent you from pursuing your dreams and desires and your destiny.** The sinking feeling can disguise itself as self-preservation. You can try to convince yourself that the uneasiness and apprehension is a means of preserving your life. You can tell yourself that you are saving yourself from injury or protecting yourself from danger. But, that’s a lie.

   The gospel truth is that walking by faith is dangerous indeed! Discipleship is a source of great joy...and great cost. Following in the footsteps of Jesus spells certain risk on the way to reward. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”

   You give your life in order to save it. So, again, every step you take toward the deeper waters of faith means facing the likelihood of loss or letdown or losing your balance. No matter. Stand up. Step out. Keep marching.

3. **Equip yourself with devotional resources -- bread for the journey, blessings, wisdom sayings, meditations and petitions.** There is no cure for the sinking feeling. But, there are sacred and soothing words like Jan Richardson’s ‘Blessing in
the Chaos’. I shared it several months ago when we were first beginning to see a flattening of the contagion surge and diminishment of the raging waves of worldwide fear. It was a saving balm then. I offer it again this morning, praying that it might assuage your anxiety and ease that sinking feeling:

“To all that is chaotic in you...let there come silence. Let there be a calming of the clamoring...a stilling of the voices that have laid their claim in you...that have made their home in you...that go with you even to the holy places...but will not let you rest, will not let you hear your life with wholeness or feel the grace that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you cease. Let what divides you cease. Let there come an end to what diminishes and demeans, and let depart all that keeps you in its cage. Let there be an opening into the quiet that lies beneath the chaos, where you find the peace you did not think possible, and see what shimmers within the storm.”

I can see Jesus coming toward us over the tumult. I can hear him speaking softly, tenderly: “Take heart. Do not be afraid.”

Amen.