

2026 Propers 14A

One image I like for our life with God: A parent with a child who is learning how to walk.

You know how it goes—once the child has gained the necessary motor functions to stand on her own, and has practiced bouncing up and down, moving around holding onto the furniture, the dog, the nearest leg, she is ready. You hold those sweet little hands and she learns how to step out, and she grows confident, as long as she has mom or dad or Aunt Nancy's hands steadying her.

But then that moment comes when it's time. It's time to let her try it on her own. Part of the job for the adult is to step back—arms outstretched, encouraging the child to come forward, ready to grab the child if the fall looks too dangerous. But the adult has to be willing to let go, to be hands-off. The child will never learn to walk as long as the parent holds on or stands too close.

I am only an aunt, but I know that clenched gut feeling that comes when you see the child take those first, tentative steps on her own. You feel great joy as the child succeeds, and when the inevitable loss of balance, THUMP! to the floor, and tears come, there is a mix of emotions: compassion for the child's frustration and a certain kind of amused joy and a certain sense of

sadness and loss. The child is learning to walk. It's beautiful! The short-term falls are not permanent failure, but part of the learning process.

This perspective is lost on the child, of course. The child is frustrated, and if the fall resulted in any sort of bump or bruise, she is likely to go back to crawling for a while. Feels much safer, much more efficient.

But she comes back to it. The urge to walk is too great, and eventually there she is again, upright, tottering on uncertain little feet, and this time she makes more progress. This time she doesn't fall on the floor but into the overjoyed Mama's arms, and gets a hug and a cheer.

But even THAT is not the end of it. Soon she is wriggling away, wrestling to get back down onto her own two feet, eager to experience that independence of being able to move herself from one place to another. You rush around putting plastic plug covers in outlets, pushing sharp corners out of the way, setting plants on high shelves and putting the pens and pencils in drawers. As soon as she has mastered this step, you are already making preparations for the next one.

And before you can imagine it, she's asking for the keys to the car, and you are suddenly aware that you have done your job well—she is able to move from place to place on her own—and you begin to worry and hope

that she makes good choices about where she will go when she is so completely free from your grasp.

I like this image for our relationship with God—although I don't think we are ever fully independent from God's grasp—I like imagining God standing back and letting us learn to walk, and the combination of amusement and compassion when we have our "THUMP" moments, because God can see how we are learning to walk, we are becoming the people we have been created to be. I ask you to keep this image in mind as we look at today's readings.

First there's this story about Joseph and his brothers. Probably enough of you know the rest of the story to know that in the end, things turn out just fine for Joseph—and indeed, for all his brothers as well. But it's a long way to that happy ending, and in the middle of it, it's a HORRIBLE story! The brothers are envious and angry. It's bad enough that Joseph is *Daddy's* favorite, and now he's telling them these dreams of his: dreams in which they all bow down to him as their superior, dreams that suggest that he's *God's* favorite as well. D. You know I don't believe violence is ever a solution to a problem, but I have to admit that I have a certain amount of sympathy with the brothers' disgust with him. Joseph could have been a bit more tactful in sharing what he had seen in his dreams. Anyone assessing the family dynamics today would find his lack

of awareness a contributing factor to the larger dysfunction. He has some growing up to do, and unfortunately it's going to be a pretty painful process for him. I don't believe God PLANNED for any of these things to happen to him; however, I do think this is an example of what I mean about God exercising restraint, letting his beloved child Joseph take a few steps and fall down in order to learn how to walk more faithfully with God. Joseph is never going to become who he needs to be—for himself, and for the people of God, if God rushes in and rescues him in this moment.

The lectionary leaves us smack in the middle of one of Joseph's THUMPs; we don't see the successful walking until next week. And it skips over a number of those Joseph-meets-the-pavement moments altogether. This is not the last story of betrayal and imprisonment in Joseph's "learning to walk" story. It's just the last one the lectionary shows you.

And it is paired, oddly enough, with one of my favorite stories from the Gospels. Not surprisingly, it includes a story of Peter getting in over his head—this time literally.

You know I have a soft spot for Peter. I was ordained a priest on the feast of the Confession of St. Peter, and he is, in many ways, a good patron saint for me. Peter is somebody who had a LOT of THUMP moments. Peter

would be doing really well, and then he'd take his eyes off God, lose his balance, and THUMP! ignominiously land on his behind yet again. I think Peter is a great example to us of how God can use even the most imperfect person to do great things.

But this story starts—and ends—with Jesus. Jesus sends the disciples ahead of him while he goes off to pray by himself. We know Jesus doesn't get much time alone; just coming off vacation I can imagine how refreshing it probably was to be in a place where he could only hear his own thoughts, where he could just be still and not worry about things for a while. But then, during the night, he decides to walk across the lake. If I allowed myself a little eisegesis—putting my own “stuff” into the story—I might suggest that he began to miss them, as I began to miss you during these three weeks of vacation. But that's MY stuff, not anything actually found in the text. A different telling of this story in another Gospel says that he intended to get by them unseen, but that's not the case here. Here, he seems to be heading straight for them. Walking. On the water.

He's walking ON the water toward them.

When we use that phrase “walking on water” nowadays, we usually think about it in comparison to Jesus. Either we are describing a person who is so good, so holy that he “practically walks on water” or we use it to describe

an arrogant, self-important person who seems to *think* he “can walk on water.”

But if we only carry those two ideas about what it means to walk on water, we miss the point of this story.

Yes, Jesus is walking on the water. I could go off on a whole “God gets to break the laws of physics” rant here, but I don’t think that is the point.

I think the point of this story is not JESUS walking on the water, but Peter walking on the water. In this story, PETER walks on the water.

For a few steps. And only while he was focused on Jesus. As soon as he was distracted by the wind and the waves, and allowed his fear to drown out his faith, that he began to sink.

A big old THUMP moment. Or perhaps, in this situation, a “gurgle gurgle gasp” moment, as he began to drown.

And here is the wonderful lesson in all this:

Yes, God lets us fall down.

Yes, God lets us get a little bruised and bumped up as we learn how to follow.

Yes, God lets us face the consequences when we let ourselves get distracted from what’s important.

But NO—*God does not let us drown*. When we call out for help, God is there. When Peter began to sink, there was Jesus, reaching out his hand, catching him. God does not let him drown.

I don't hear condemnation in the question he asks Peter, once he's out of danger. I hear the voice of an amused parent who is reassuring a child who has been trying to walk and has fallen down and is ready to give up. "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?" The unspoken word is, "Don't you know I wouldn't have let you drown? Don't you know I'm more powerful than the wind and the waves? Don't you know how much I love you?"

This story is about learning to be more courageous, to take holy risks to follow our Lord, to spread the Good News, because that's what we have been created to do. There is no promise that you won't land on your behind once in a while in a thoroughly embarrassing THUMP! There is no promise that you won't get a little wet when you try to walk on water. But there IS a promise that whatever comes of it, you will end up in the arms of the One who made you, who takes such delight in your willingness to step out in faith, to attempt the impossible. The One who is standing there, exercising divine restraint so that you can learn what you need to learn by falling down, The One who will let you fall down, but is always there, arms outstretched, ready to catch you before you drown.

Don't you know how much God loves you?

Amen.