

BIBLE READING: Matthew 14:22-33 Jesus walking on the sea

SERMON

This is a well-known story. Often the point of the story has been seen in what Peter does. Peter gets out of the boat and quite literally steps out in faith. Indeed, in all of our lives, we can see Jesus standing out on the stormy waters of life, bidding us to "Come" to him. Like Peter, we must find the courage of faith needed to swing our legs out over the boat's side, and then step out onto the waters. If we do, then we will walk to and with Jesus, trusting him alone to help us do great things for God!

But beware of doubts, of fears! Don't pay any attention to the winds that howl or the waves that lap against your toes. Keep your eyes fixed on the Master. For if you do, then in his loving and confident gaze, you will find the strength and courage you need to stay upright. Peter failed to have enough faith, but you can do better! So if you are facing some big decision, if you sense God calling you to the mission field, or if you're wondering how you can witness to your co-workers, then you need to have the guts to get out of the boat, to take risks, to put your full faith in Jesus alone, and then to walk upon the waters!

Interpreted this way, Matthew 14 becomes a kind of model for Christian behaviour. Peter's faith is to be copied, his failure of doubt is to be avoided. The bottom line is that if you do it right, then you, too, can walk on water. Jesus even wants you to walk on water, he wants you to be this bold in the faith. The alternatives are fear and doubt, and we all know that those things ought to have no place in a true believer's heart.

"Walking on water" is about courage, faith, and boldness. This phrase has come to mean something like this in even non-Christian settings. If you do an Internet search on the phrase "walk on water," you will find a number of consulting firms and motivational speakers who use the image of walking on water as the goal to which businesses and individual workers should aspire. In this sense, "walk on water" is similar to sayings like "the early bird gets the worm," "grab the tiger by its tail," "think outside the box," or "when the going gets tough, the tough get going."

But is that the only - or even the best - way to interpret Matthew 14:22-33?

Before looking at this familiar story from a different angle, I want to affirm that it is right that Christian faith is about a life lived with courage, zeal, and resolved to stay true to Jesus in all situations. Whether or not this particular story teaches that is something we will reflect on, but let's be clear - the ability to trust Jesus fully is something we all need to practice.

So what is going on in that boat? Well, I believe that this story is a kind of acted-out parable of and for the church. Probably the boat is a symbol of the church in which disciples travel with Jesus across the storm-tossed seas of an unbelieving world. But if so, then what about the role Peter plays? How do his actions and words relate to the rest of us in that storm tossed boat we call the church?

The answer to that emerges from the story itself which comes immediately after Jesus' feeding of the 5,000. That was basically a Lord's Supper kind of story, showing Jesus as the true bread of life. Although the food and drink the church offers to the world looks rather modest, if not inadequate, in the hands of Jesus this becomes completely satisfying food. As it turns out, we in the church have more than enough to offer to the world if only we believe the power of Jesus' word to us.

Immediately this meal is over Jesus sends the disciples out into a boat. He doesn't go with them at first, but the implication is that he will catch up with them soon enough. Meanwhile he wants to pray. He has just found out that his cousin, friend, and gospel co-worker, John

the Baptist, has been killed by Herod. After hearing this sad news, Jesus wanted to be alone right away, and so took that boat to a lonely place where presumably he could weep, mourn, and pray to his Father in private. The crowds followed him, however, and so Jesus delays his time of grieving long enough to do some more teaching and healing, followed by his feeding those same crowds.

His ministry got in the way of his personal feelings for a little while, but the delay hardly made everything all better and so Jesus still wants some quiet time. So he sends the disciples on ahead so that he could pray. We don't know how much time Jesus managed to have to himself even on this second attempt at some private devotions, but before too much longer one of those unpredictable Sea of Galilee storms had blown in. In this particular story we are not told that the boat was in danger of sinking, but then again, getting buffeted by wind and water in the middle of a very dark night is a frightening, if not a very dangerous, situation to be in.

So Jesus comes to them and, once he assures them he is no ghost, seems ready to get into the boat to reassure them further. But before he gets there, Peter calls out. "Lord, if it is you, then command me to come to you on the water." "Come on, then!" Jesus replies, and so Peter does. We don't know how far Peter got before he started to sink, but suddenly Peter began to sink. Jesus saves him, of course, rebuking him for his doubt. Then they both climb into the boat, the storm stops even more quickly than it had started, and the disciples who had remained in the boat all along end up worshipping Jesus as God's Son.

In Matthew 14 we have seen incidents in which Jesus' Lordship over all creation has been displayed. Jesus is Lord of creation and so can miraculously provide the things of life like bread and fish to feed people even in a place of desolation and death. And now we see Jesus as Lord of creation in having control over the water, winds, and waves. Jesus can control the elements of nature in this fallen world that threaten us as well as provide the things that nourish us. Taken together, those with eyes to see recognise in Jesus the Emmanuel, of "God with us." (A theme begun in Matthew 1 and rounded out again in the final verses of Matthew 28)

But why did Jesus rebuke Peter? Was it because once he got out of the boat his fears quite sank him or did Jesus rebuke Peter for getting out of the boat in the first place? Maybe a clue can be found in what Jesus said. Jesus did not ask Peter, "Why were you afraid?" That would be logical since verse 30 told us that when Peter saw the wind, he was "afraid." But Jesus asked about doubt, not fear. (Of course, it's possible that it was Peter's fear that led him to doubt, or that it was his doubt that led him to be afraid. In other words, maybe fear and doubt are so connected in this story that it finally makes no sense to distinguish between these two notions.)

But I think there is reason to distinguish between the two. The particular Greek word for "doubt" that Matthew chooses here occurs only twice in the whole Bible, and both are in Matthew. Everywhere else that the idea of "doubt" occurs, a different Greek word gets used. The kind of doubt Matthew refers to in this chapter is not a doubt that comes from fear. Rather this is a more rational or logical doubt that ties in with who Jesus is. Is Jesus who he says he is? Is he what he appears to be? When faced with Jesus, you have two choices: worship or doubt. Maybe that's why the only other place in the New Testament where you find this Greek word for doubt is in Matthew 28, at the very end of the gospel and right before Jesus gives the Great Commission. The disciples gathered around the resurrected Lord Jesus, "they worshiped him; but some doubted."

In Matthew 14, Jesus rebukes Peter for his doubt only to have the rest of the disciples begin worshipping him a few moments later. Matthew 14 and 28 are the only two places in this gospel where you find doubt and worship so closely associated with each other.

So what exactly was it that Peter "doubted?" The answer can be found in verse 28 when Peter utters the word "if": "If it is you, then command me to come to you." ...If... The word implies doubt, of needing to test something out. There are only a couple of other times in Matthew when someone addresses Jesus through the word "if." It happens three times in Matthew 4 when the devil repeatedly says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God . . ." and then tempts Jesus to prove it by doing something amazing. And it happens again near the end of Matthew: "If you are the Son of God, come down from that cross!"

Now in Matthew 14, sadly enough, Peter joins those asking Jesus to do something to prove he is who he says he is. "If you are who you say you are, then make me do something grand like walking on water!" Peter fails, and Jesus rebukes him for his doubt

But you could read this as if Jesus were asking Peter, "What are you doing outside the boat in the first place?" Jesus had just shown them how much he could do with no more than simple bread and fish. That has to be enough for us most of the time. But now Peter wants something more and not just that, but he wants this something more as a way to test out Jesus' true power and identity.

You can be afraid of wind and waves, but what you doubt is whether or not Jesus is the Great I Am, the Son of the Living God, the Lord of Life. You can believe that or not, but making God prove it by doing this or that amazing thing is a sign of little faith. Sometimes it's enough just to be in the boat, waiting for Jesus' presence among us, believing that no matter what: In the storms of life or when everything is plain sailing – surely Jesus is with us, even to the end of the age.

We don't usually think much about the eleven disciples in the boat--you know, the ones who didn't try to walk on water. Those disciples just stayed in the boat, pulling on their oars against the wind, steering their way toward Jesus. Even if this story is about what people have always thought – that we need to do heroic and dramatic acts of stepping out on faith - even so, there is something to be said about faithful, non-dramatic work in the boat, too. There's something to be said for just believing the power of Jesus' word when he claims we need not fear because he is the Great I Am.

What is the real miracle here? Maybe it's not that Jesus could walk on water (after all, if Jesus is God, then his ability to walk on water is not surprising) And the miracle is not that Peter managed to do the same for a moment or two. No, the miracle is that when it was all said and done - while a wet and sorry Peter coughed seawater out of his lungs and as the boat continued to bob around in the storm on that rather dark night - somehow in the midst of all that way out there in the middle of nowhere, the disciples realised that no one less than God's own Son was sitting right in front of them. So they worshipped him. They believed.

If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat. True enough. And here and there, now and again, the church needs visionary and courageous people who step out on faith to do some new and bold thing. But maybe there are far more times when life in the "boat" that just is the church, involves no more than faithfully pulling on your oar against the winds that howl, believing that Jesus is near, and so pressing on. You press on in faith not because you've tested Jesus and found that he lived up to all that he said and not because Jesus has enabled you yourself to do something quite grand and eye-catching. No, you press on because you believe Jesus when, through the Spirit, you hear him say, "Take courage! It is I! Don't be afraid!"

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