

Matthew 14:22–33

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. 26But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. 27But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

28 Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' 29He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. 30But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' 31Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' 32When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I want to talk a bit about the significance of water in the Bible. Water is very important in so many ways. Water represents God's blessing and renewal in rain and in baptism. Water is significant in Moses' story as a means of escape for baby Moses floating down the Nile and when Moses parts the Red Sea for his people escaping Egypt, yet it also represents chaos in the creation stories of Genesis and in today's text as well. The storm in today's scripture certainly can be considered to represent the chaos in life, and one of the biggest sayings about taking life by the horns and making things happen is; "If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat."

That was the title some years back of a popular book written by John Ortberg. And the title reflects what is doubtless the most common "take" on this scripture. Over and over again this well-known story comes to mean something like the following: Peter had the right idea getting out of the boat and quite literally "stepping out on faith." Indeed, in all of our lives, we can see Jesus standing out on the stormy waters of this world, bidding us to "Come" unto him. Like Peter, we must heed this invitation, 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, be wary of fears! Don't pay any attention to the winds that howl or the waves that lap against your shins. Keep your eyes fixed on Christ. 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 hey, 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 others 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! Dearly beloved, here endeth the lesson. Amen. Or maybe not . . .

Interpreted this way, Matthew 14 becomes a kind of model for Christian behavior, a classic piece of moralism. Peter's initial faith is to be emulated; his subsequent failure of doubt is to be avoided. "Do this . . . Don't do that . . ."

But understood this way, 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 just 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. Indeed, this phrase has come to mean something like this even in 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 on par with other adages like “The early bird gets the worm,” “Grab the tiger by its tail,” “Think outside the box” (or the boat in this case), or “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

And at the end of any sermon with this focus, I'd wager that 90% of the folks listening to the sermon will feel worse about themselves, their faith, and their commitment to Christ. Oh, they will perhaps feel motivated to give this whole ‘walking on water’ thing a whirl but they sense as they walk out the doors or turn off the recording that they will probably bow out before they actually make the attempt (or if they do attempt it, they will sink immediately).

It reminds me of when people make New Year's resolutions, especially about fitness. When I went to the YMCA in the Twin Cities, and even here at the Wellness Center the place would be packed the first week of January. Lots of new faces with new exercise clothes and shoes, doing classes, using treadmills, and ellipticals, and working on the weight machines. By the second week some of them would disappear. By mid-February there might be one person who started in January still there, otherwise it was just us regulars left. All those bright-eyed new folks ran into issues and became discouraged. Whether it was that it took too much time, it wasn't interesting enough, or maybe they worked too hard too quickly and hurt themselves, or it was too painful; whatever the reason, they became discouraged and didn't come back.

I think some sermons these days just makes people feel worse. The expectations the minister presents are just too big, (Or the preaching makes people feel motivated but the whole focus centers on human effort and achievement.) Either way, or both ways, these sermons do not radiate with the grace that constitutes the Good News we are called to proclaim. So, is that moralistic, “Try harder!” way of getting at this story the only—or even the best—way to interpret Matthew 14:22-33? Perhaps not.

Before getting to some new angles on this familiar story, we should be clear about a couple of things up front. First, it surely is right that Christian faith should be characterized by courage, zeal, and a firm resolve to stay true to the Lord in all situations. Whether or not this particular story teaches that is something we will look at, but let's be clear up front that gaining the ability to trust Jesus fully is certainly something to which we all should aspire.

But that broader theological point aside, what is going on specifically in Matthew 14? Well, like the other gospel stories having to do with boats and storms and disciples, I suspect that this incident is a kind of acted-out parable of and for the church. Probably the boat is a metaphorical 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 as we, too, reside in the ship of faith that is the church?

The answer to that emerges from the story itself. This scripture passage comes immediately after Jesus' feeding of the 5,000. As I mentioned last week 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 meager, in the hands of Jesus this

becomes utterly satisfying and even abundant fare. 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.

No sooner is that Eucharist-type meal complete and Jesus sends the disciples out into a boat. He doesn't go with them at first, but the implication is that he would catch up with them soon enough. Meanwhile he wants to pray. Remember, he had just found out that his cousin, friend, and gospel co-worker, John the Baptist, had 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 God 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 the disciples feeding that same crowd.

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 is still looking for 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 necessarily, but then again, getting buffeted by wind and water in the middle of a very dark night is surely 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 poised to get into the boat to reassure them further. But before he gets there, Peter intervenes. "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 precisely how far Peter got before he started to sink. Maybe a gust of wind knocked him off balance, or a larger-than-usual swell made straight for Peter, whatever the reason, suddenly the logic of the situation was just too much for Peter to discount and so he yielded to the inevitable tug of gravity. Jesus saves him, of course, chiding him for his doubt (I imagine he does it with a smile, rather than angrily, loving Peter as always). 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 doing the totally proper act of worshipping Jesus as God's Son.

We have now seen back-to-back incidents in which Jesus' Lordship over all creation has been abundantly displayed. Jesus is Lord of creation and so can manipulate the sustaining 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 subside the elements of nature in this fallen world that threaten our lives as well as provide the things that nourish those same lives. Taken together, those with eyes to see, as they say, recognize in Jesus the almighty presence of one of Matthew's main theological themes (begun in Matthew 1 and rounded out again in the final verses of Matthew 28): namely, the theme of Emmanuel, of "God with us."

And that is the Good News. Jesus remains with us. He remains with us and is the Lord of all Creation as well. Whether or not Peter succeeded in imitating his Master's neat trick neither adds nor subtracts from the core revelation that whether we stay in the boat with the eleven disciples or hop out of the boat with the one disciple, Jesus is with us. He's with those of us who stay in the boat and will calm the storm that threatens. He's with those who try some grandstand move and fail, forgiving the failure and, again, calming the storm that tempted Peter to do something miraculous. Jesus' presence and power are the key to this story, not whether we are bold and courageous and impressive.

As Barbara Brown Taylor said in a sermon, if there is a miracle worth savoring in this story, then it's maybe not that Jesus could walk on water (after all, if Jesus is God, then his ability to walk on water is no more surprising than your or my ability to walk up a flight of steps.) And the miracle is not that Peter managed that same trick for a moment or two. No, the miracle is that when it was all said and done—while a soggy and chagrined Peter sputtered seawater out of his lungs and as the boat continued to bob around in the dead of that rather dark night—somehow in the midst of those humble surroundings way out there in the middle of nowhere, the disciples realized that no one less than God's own Son was sitting right in front of them. So, they worshiped 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 maybe needs visionary and courageous folks 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 is the church involves no more than faithfully pulling on your oar against the winds that howl, believing that Jesus is near, and pressing on. You press on in faith not because you've tested Jesus and found that he lived up to all the hype 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, "Chin up! It is I! Don't be afraid!" So, keep pulling on that oar!

To take the focus off Jesus and to put it onto our own moral gumption and courage seems, therefore, (if you'll forgive me) to miss the boat. But the truth is, a lot of people are missing the boat in the church these days. As Kristin Kobes DuMez has highlighted in her new book *Jesus and John Wayne*, American evangelicals specifically have been deeply affected by a strain of "muscular Christianity" that is messing up the Gospel message in many ways. Lately this desire for Christian men in particular to step it up with muscular Gospel swagger has been coming out in some church's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. In some places masks are being declared as a sign of weak faith. Churches following government restrictions on holding worship services are likewise considered weak and not near bold enough by some. The sad part about this is that in many of those cases people are actually dying from that belief.

In a sense the response in some places to the pandemic is "Step out of the boat, walk on water, and be a real man for Jesus!" But again, that is not the point of this story even as such postures of swagger and bravado and male-centered braggadocio do not fit the true Gospel nor the example of Jesus. The eleven disciples who prudently stayed in the boat and faithfully kept pulling on the oars were no more or less faithful than impetuous Peter was. Sometimes the right and faithful thing to do is the quiet and non-flashy thing, acts of quiet humility and sacrifice and service. Taking care of our neighbors, wearing our masks, and listening to real medical experts. It is not weak to stay in the boat—remember, inside the boat is where Jesus also is when this story ends. Amen