

Matthew 14:22-33

There is an old story that has often been re-told in especially the Eastern Orthodox part of the church. According to the tale, a devout abbot from a monastery decided to take a prolonged spiritual retreat in a small cabin located on a remote island in the middle of a large lake. He told his fellow monks that he wanted to spend his days in prayer so as to grow closer to God. For six months he remained on the island with no other person seeing him or hearing from him in all that time. But then one day, as two monks were standing near the shore soaking up some sunshine, they could see in the distance a figure moving toward them. It was the abbot, walking on water, and coming toward shore. After the abbot passed by the two monks and continued on to the monastery, one of the monks turned to the other and said, "All these months in prayer and the abbot is still as stingy as ever. After all, the ferry costs only 25 cents!"

Humor aside, the point of the story is that it's amazing how easily we may sometimes miss the significance of something that is right in front of us. It's the kind of thing that could motivate one to take a fresh look at even the very familiar, like the story in Matthew 14 about Jesus (and then Peter) walking on water.

The title of a recent book by John Ortberg may well serve as a good summary for a usual way the story in Matthew 14 has been interpreted. The title of the book is, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. 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 life, bidding us to "Come" to 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 your fears! Don't pay any attention to the winds that howl or the waves that lap against your legs. 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 afloat. 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 a special purpose, 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 living. Peter's initial faith is to be emulated, his subsequent failure of doubt is to be avoided. But 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 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 on a par with other adages 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..." I think you get the idea.

But is that 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 is right that Christian faith should be characterized by courage, passion, and a firm resolve to stay true

to the Lord in all situations. Whether or not this *particular* story teaches that is something we'll delve into, but let's be clear up front that gaining the ability to trust Jesus fully is certainly something to which we should all 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, maybe our church here in Lake Pleasant/Speculator. 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, row our boat?

The answer to that emerges from the story itself. This gospel comes immediately after Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, 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. 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 indeed catch up with them soon enough. Meanwhile he wants to pray. He has just found out that his cousin, friend, and evangelist, John the Baptist, has been killed by Herod. After hearing this sad news, Jesus wanted to be alone, 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 is still in need of 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 long one of those unpredictable Sea of Galilee squalls 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 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. A gust of wind knocked him off balance, a larger-than-usual swell made straight for Peter, and suddenly the logic of the situation was just too much for him to discount and so he yielded to the inevitable tug of gravity. Jesus saves him, of course, chiding 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 doing the utterly 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 control 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 recognize in Jesus

the almighty presence of one of Matthew's main theological themes namely, the theme of Emmanuel, of "God with us."

So why did Jesus chide Peter? Was it because once he got out of the boat his fears quite literally sank him or did Jesus chide 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 intimately 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 pop up 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 the very person of Jesus. Is Jesus who he says he is? Is he what he appears to be? When faced with the reality of 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. There, at the very end of the gospel and right before Jesus gives the Great Commission, we are told that as the disciples gathered around the resurrected Lord Jesus, "they worshiped him; but some doubted."

In Matthew 14, Jesus chides Peter for his doubt only to have the rest of the disciples begin worshiping 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. I think that says something!

So what exactly was it that Peter "doubted?" The answer may be in verse 28 when Peter utters the word "if": "If it is you, then command me to come to you." *If*. The very word smacks of doubt, of needing to test something. 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, in the wilderness, 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 ranks in 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 impressive like walking on water!" Peter fails, and Jesus chides 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 validating that is not something you should try to do by requiring that God prove it by doing an amazing thing. Sometimes it's enough just to be in the boat, awaiting Jesus' presence among us, believing that winds and waves or no, he is surely 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 did not try some grandstand move like hopping over the gunwale for some fancy footwork on the

waves. Those disciples just stayed in the boat, pulling on their oars against the wind, steering their way toward Jesus so that he could do no more than just get on board along with the rest of them. Even if this story is about what people have always thought--that is, the need to do heroic and dramatic acts of stepping out on faith--even so, there is something to be said about faithful, low-key, 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.

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 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" when life involves faithfully pulling on your oar against the winds, believing that Jesus is near. 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 to do something incredible. No, you keep on keeping on because you believe Jesus when, through the Spirit, you hear him say, "Buck up! It is I! Don't be afraid!"

When he comes to them on the water, Jesus quickly calms them in a verbal triple-play that packs quite a theological wallop: "Take courage! I am! Fear not!" As commentator Dale Bruner notes, this is something that could well become the inscription over the doorway to every church in the world. Because Jesus' call for courage and his command not to be afraid are both rooted in the second thing he said: "I am!"

For the sake of good English sense, most versions of the Bible do something similar to what the NIV does in verse 27, and that is that they translate Jesus' words into something like "It is I" or "I am here" or, "It's me!" But the Greek says only *ego eimi*: "I am." Here, and elsewhere in the gospels, this simple designation powerfully connects Jesus to the Yahweh of Israel. When Moses asks God in the burning bush for his name, God says that his name is "I Am." Yahweh is the great "I Am," and Jesus more than once connects himself to this very same God. Jesus is God, and that's why his presence gives us cause to take courage and, in turn, to not be afraid.

(Thank you to Scott Hoezee, article very freely adapted for 8-10-08)