

Get In the Boat

Jesus and Peter walk on the Sea

Matthew 14:22-33
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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I'm sure that many of you are familiar with this story from Matthew 14, the miracle story of Jesus – and Peter – walking on the water as their boat is battered upon a storm-tossed sea. I've always been partial to stories that involve boats and the sea. As it turns out, boats and the sea play an important role in many biblical stories, sometimes in a literal way, but more often than not as metaphorical symbolism.

From a biblical perspective, for instance, the sea most often carried the connotation not as a peaceful escape from the pressures of life, but as a dangerous, unpredictable, and chaotic place. (The wilderness often plays a similar role in other biblical stories.)

Going all the way back to the first chapter in Genesis we learn that **the waters of the sea symbolize the forces of chaos. In the creation story, God brings order out of that chaos.** We'll look at how that applies to our New Testament story in just a moment.

To extend the metaphor further in today's story, a boat sailing upon the sea is introduced. The strength and nature of one's boat (metaphorically) determined whether or not it could survive a trip upon the sea of chaos. Ever since this story was first told orally – probably for about 30-40 years before it was put in print – its deeper spiritual meaning was clear to its hearers. In fact, **it can almost be understood as a parable.**

Since the earliest days of Christianity, **a boat has stood as a common symbol to represent the Church. Those in the boat represent Christians. And the storm-tossed sea, just like in Old Testament days, continues to mean chaos and the dark forces that threaten the goodness of life and the created order.** In the particular historical context of Matthew, it refers to the hardship, conflict, temptations, and persecution that battered the early church. And, as it turns out, it is symbolic of the church's stormy missionary journey throughout history.

Jesus, of course, plays the most important role in this story. **Beyond any literal meaning of Jesus walking on the water to save his disciples – as in defying the laws of gravity – this story always carried the metaphorical meaning that Christ, like God, overcomes the power of chaos,** and therefore would prevail against anything that might try to destroy the Church and Christianity itself. That Jesus is identified with God is made clear by the author of the gospel when he writes that Jesus said to his disciples, "It is I" (or literally in the Greek, "I am.") This is the same phrase that the Old Testament author uses as God's identification when God speaks to Moses from the burning bush.

Last Sunday I spent a lot of time talking about miracles in the Bible and whether they should be taken literally or not. Likewise, we don't need to get hung up with the literalness of this story either. But saying that, I also am not comfortable with what I've heard throughout the years as some kind of rational approach to this story that tries to explain it away by saying that maybe Jesus was just walking on a sandbar, or maybe

the author meant that Jesus was walking “by” the sea, like on the seashore, instead of “on” the sea. None of that makes any difference to this story. So let’s simply look at it for what it says, because this passage has a lot to say to the church today.

When it comes to a faithful interpretation of this story, it’s very important to note how it begins. We’re told that, “Jesus *made* the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee” (vs. 22). The disciples were simply being obedient in faithfully following the instructions that Jesus gave them. **It was Jesus who sent them out to sea. Therefore, the difficulties they experience on the sea are not of their own making, but stem from their compliance with Jesus’ command to venture forth.**

What this teaches us is that we shouldn’t be surprised then either when in following God’s directive to venture forth in ministry, that the sea we travel upon also sometimes becomes chaotic, unpredictable, and perhaps even a bit threatening. We are reminded that the church, then and now, is called into being by God. **It is God who sends us out in mission and ministry onto an often-dangerous sea – the world around us.**

It is true that most mainline denominations are currently facing challenging and difficult times. **I find it disheartening, however, that so many folks have chosen to get out of the boat – to leave the church or Christianity altogether – rather than to ride out the storm until the seas are calm.** This biblical story served as one of great comfort to the early church, and therefore should continue to be a source of comfort to the church and to Christians today.

I’m sure each one of you here this morning could make a list (maybe even a long list) of the storms that you have faced, or are currently facing, in your life. Some of those storms may be from without, and some of those storms may be from within. **And just as Jesus did not leave his disciples to fend for themselves in their hour of need, God will not leave us to fend for ourselves either.** We, too, like the disciples, need to hear deep within our hearts and minds the same words of Jesus, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

There is one more important element to this story, of course, and that’s Peter. Peter responds to Jesus’ comment to not be afraid by asking permission to come to Jesus on the sea. Interestingly, he does not impetuously leap out of the boat. Rather, he waits until he hears the command from Jesus: “Come” (Matt. 14:28-19). **It is Jesus who calls Peter forth.** And for a brief time Peter, like Jesus, is able to walk on the rough sea. It is in this instant that **we catch a brief glimpse of what Matthew believes discipleship is all about – obeying Jesus and moving toward him confidently even in the midst of a threatening and dangerous storm.** But Peter, we’re told, cannot maintain his posture. He catches sight of the wind, and now there are **two rival powers symbolically in view: Jesus and chaos.** Peter’s faith is now mixed with fear and, wondering whether Jesus or the raging wind will finally prevail, he begins to sink beneath the sea.

Matthew wants his readers to know that even when disciples falter, and that includes each one of us, Jesus continues to save. He rescues Peter, and us, from chaos. **In our own journey of faith we, like Peter, are Christians caught midway between certainty and doubt, between courage and anxiety, between peace and fear.** Yet Peter, rather than representing some kind of failure, represents the risk-taking element of faith.

We, too, are called to take risks, even when the outcome isn’t certain. I’m sure you can reflect upon the risks that you have taken in your life in stepping out in faith. I know that this congregation has taken risks, time and time again, as it has stepped out

in faith to bear witness to God's inclusive love and acceptance within this community, this presbytery, and beyond.

One final point. Unlike some misguided interpretations of this biblical story, the message is not that Peter would have been able to walk on the sea if he only had enough faith. Likewise, **the message to us is not, "If we had enough faith we could overcome all our problems in spectacular and miraculous ways." This story suffers a great disservice if it's simply used as a device for the erroneous platitude that "if we just keep our eyes fixed on Jesus then we won't ever falter." The life of faith is not that simplistic.**

Faith is not being able to walk on water – only God can do that. Rather, **faith is daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence, that God is with us in the boat, made real to you and me as we make our way through the storms of life.**

The story holds out to you and me a promise that God comes to us in the midst of the storm, that the storm does not hold the upper hand, and that God is present with us in the storm and rescues us. So when you become fearful or filled with anxiety, remember the words of Jesus, **"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."**

And may we, like the disciples of old, never fear to 'get in the boat' even when threatened by rough seas. Get in the boat!

Amen.