

Seaworthy

Matthew 14:22-33

August 10, 2008

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Do you ever wonder why all of these miraculous things happened back in Biblical times and not today?

Feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish; turning water into wine; virgin births; raising the dead; healing the sick; cleansing lepers – and today, walking on water.

Well, wonder no more. A couple of years ago a scientific study was published that made a few headlines. It turns out that in Northern Israel there was a period of cold weather about 1500 – 2600 years ago. It also turns out that the Sea of Galilee is in the Northern region of Israel. This scientific study suggests that it is possible that the Sea of Galilee was cold enough to create something called “Springs Ice” – underwater ice formations that could support the weight of a human being.¹

Boy, am I glad we have that cleared up. Now if we could just uncover the scientific explanation for turning water into wine, we will be in business!

I am pretty sure when Matthew included this story of Jesus walking on the water to meet his disciples he wasn't too concerned with the science of how it was possible. The stories in Scripture have not been passed on through the years to that we can finally figure them out and unlock all of their mystery. Scripture is passed from generation to generation to tell us something about God and the people of God.

As the preacher Joanna Adams said, “the challenge of faith has little, if anything to do with taking [the stories of the Bible] literally, and everything to do with taking them seriously...It doesn't make a bit of difference whether you think there was a talking snake in the Garden of Eden, or even that there was a Garden of Eden, but it makes all the difference whether you believe what the snake said.”²

So what about this story? What makes it more than a story about a neat trick that Jesus pulls off for his disciples?

¹ News story found on: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4881108.stm, by Dr. Doran Nof of The Florida State University.

² Adams, Joanna, “Faith and Fear” (*Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 1996).

Matthew writes his gospel for the church and for people who knew their Bibles. As such, two things become clear. First, water is not simply water. Water is a threat; water represents the forces of chaos. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters...”³ At creation, God tamed the forces of watery chaos; but that water continues to threaten the order of creation. As a commentator has said, “In the biblical mind, being on the sea itself is a threat, representing all the anxieties and dark powers that threaten the goodness of created order.”⁴

The second thing that would be clear to those who first heard this story is that a boat is not simply a boat. Throughout early Christian writings, when you see the disciples or the followers of Jesus on a boat: think about the church. That is the connection – the boat represents the church.

Matthew has two stories about boats. Earlier in the gospel, Jesus accompanies the disciples on a boat that is tossed around by a stormy sea. When the disciples express fear, Jesus commands the sea to calm and his disciples are amazed, saying: “even the winds and the sea obey him.”⁵

In today’s story Jesus and the disciples have just fed the five thousand. After tidying up, Jesus sends the disciples out to sea on a boat – this time, for the first time, Jesus sends them out to sea alone. Jesus stays behind to pray. Those who will establish the church are on their own, out on the sea; Jesus prepares them for the time of resurrection when the church will be without the earthly presence of their savior.⁶

Huddled together in the boat, out in the midst of the watery chaos, the disciples are fearful. They are far from the land; the waves are threatening; the wind is against them. And then, in the fourth watch of the night – that time when the darkness hangs low and morning seems a far way off – those in the boat catch glimpse of Jesus calmly

³ Genesis 1:1-2

⁴ Boring, Eugene (*New Interpreter’s Bible: Matthew*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1994) p. 327

⁵ Matthew 8:23-27

⁶ Boring, 327

walking toward them across the wave; right atop of the watery chaos; impervious to the threat posed by the sea.

This is what is amazing; this is what is miraculous: not that Jesus defies the laws of physics or skates along submerged patches of “Springs Ice,” but that Jesus is powerful enough to tame the chaos of the watery sea. The challenge for our faith is not believing in a literal interpretation of this story; the challenge for our faith is taking seriously the fact that no storms, no winds, no waves, no waters of the deep are serious threats to the sovereign power of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The challenge for our faith is taking that seriously enough, so that when our boat is out in the midst of the storm-tossed sea, wind against us and waves threatening to destroy – we might trust that the one who sent us out on the waters is still in control even when the night hangs low and we are afraid.

At the sight of Jesus on the water, the disciples were afraid. “It is a ghost!” they cried. But those disciples were not only afraid, they were incredulous. They could not believe that Jesus had the power to tame the power of the watery chaos. And so Jesus reassures them “Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” Everybody seems okay with that, except for Peter.

Bless his heart. Peter just can’t keep his mouth shut. Peter demands proof; Peter has trouble taking his faith seriously enough to believe that Jesus actually had dominion over all the world: dry land and watery depths. And so, probably unknowingly, Peter does something that Satan tried earlier in Matthew’s gospel: he tests Jesus. “Jesus, if that is really you, command me to come to you on the water.” “Jesus, I am not buying it, so prove to me that you are the Son of God.” Sound familiar? “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the temple and you will be saved.” “Jesus, if you are the Son of God make me to come out on the water with you.”

You remember what happens next. Jesus commands him to come, and Peter starts toward Jesus on the water. All goes well for a short time, and then Peter notices the wind and waves and begins to sink;

doubt creeps in and Peter cried for salvation. Reaching out his hand to catch him, Jesus admonishes Peter for his lack of faith.

Peter's faith is weak on two counts. As he walks toward Jesus, he allows the fear of the stormy water to overcome his trust in the one who commanded him to come. But the other demonstration of Peter's weakness of faith, and perhaps the more instructive for us, is that Peter felt the need to get out of the boat in the first place.

Jesus sent his disciples out into the sea; out over the waters where storms rage, winds blow, and chaos threatens. Jesus knew that the water was not simply water. It was for this reason that Jesus sent his disciples out in a *boat*, a vessel designed to carry them through the chaos together as one community. Jesus in the flesh may not be in the boat, but he built it. Peter's lack of faith is seen in not trusting the structure into which Jesus has entrusted his disciples. Peter's lack of faith is seen in his need to step out of the boat in order to fully believe in Jesus as the Son of God.

Sometimes we do that; forsake the seaworthiness of the boat to make sure Jesus is really who he says he is. Sometimes we abandon the very structure that Jesus created because we don't quite trust that it will get us through the storms.

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Mary Frances Flowers was the first female elder at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia (my previous church). If you were to pick a person to plow that road, Mary Frances was the one. She was tough, but not too tough. Polite, but not afraid to take the gloves off when needed. Deferential to men, but only to their faces.

Second Presbyterian is in downtown Richmond, four blocks from the Capital building. During the late 1950's, like many urban areas around the country, much of the white population began to move to the suburbs in droves. It was not an easy time for an historic, downtown church. The wind was strong, the waves were threatening, and the members of the session inside the boat were anxious.

Conversations started in the congregation and in the session: what should we do? Shouldn't we move? What will happen to us if we stay here? What will our future be? Where will our members come from? Eventually, these conversations turned themselves into a motion that went before the session for a vote. The motion was to move the church out to the suburbs and to close down the existing building.

When it came time to vote, the men seated around the table in the session meeting were surprised when Mary Frances spoke up. Mary Frances spoke out strongly against the motion on the floor. She said that God had called the church to be right where they were, that God had been with the church since it was founded in 1845, and that God would be with the church in the future – no matter what that future held.

I don't need to tell you that the motion failed. The decision to stay in the boat amidst the turbulent seas of integration and urban blight and, now, urban renewal, have defined the mission of Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia. And if you ask Mary Frances, now the first female elder emeritus in history of the congregation, she will tell you about all the ways that Christ has been alive in the ministry of the church with a smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye.

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Last month a group from our church went to a conference at Montreat about the future of the Presbyterian Church. We are in stormy waters, the wind is against us, the waves are lapping at the edge of the boat, the water seems threatening.

Why? Because the world is changing – and quickly. Church membership is down in many parts of the country; the place of the church in society is diminishing; we aren't as important to people outside of our boat as we used to be. It is a chaotic time.

There was a quote that stuck with the group that went to Montreat that captured well our situation. It was this: "Where we were as a church is no more, and the church God calls us to be does not exist yet." I will say that again, "Where we were as a church is no more, and the church that God calls us to be does not exist yet."

There are storms ahead. The world is changing; the church is changing; the way we communicate with each other is changing. Those things that we have depended on, those definitions that we thought would never change – they are changing, too.

As the gathered community of faith we will be tempted to step out of the boat. When the waves crash around us and the world feels chaotic there are going to be times when we wonder if this boat we call the church is really going to get us through to the other side. The desire to step out of the boat in order to prove to ourselves that Jesus is really who he says he is will be strong.

But when we feel that way; when we wonder how we will make it across the choppy sea, remember this: this boat that we call the church was built a long time ago and it has held many a disciple afloat through storms that rage. And the only one who can walk on water, the only one who has dominion over all the threats of chaos is God – God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ: the head of the church, the builder of the boat, and the one who, rather than sheltering us from the storms of the sea by keeping us on the shore, instead sends us out into the very midst of the watery chaos to be his body in the world.

May God grant us the courage to believe; and more than that, to take seriously our calling as the Church.

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Amen.