



“A Question of Faith”
Scripture – Matthew 14:22-33
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 9, 2020

What do you think about this story of Jesus walking on water? Many find it to be an impediment to faith, rather than an aid. They assume that the gospel writer is describing a supernatural act of Jesus and, either quickly turn the page to a different story, or raise their eyebrows, suspicious of this anti-gravity stroll across the surface of the sea.

Others believe that the laws of physics did not apply to Jesus. They take it literally and chalk it up to a miracle that proves the divinity of Christ.

When we read Scripture, we must keep in mind that some passages are not dependent on the historical context in which they arose. When Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with your heart, mind, and soul; and to love your neighbor as yourself, the historical context has no bearing on his words. It is a command for all the ages. However, with some passages, understanding the ancient context allows us to get a better grip on its meaning. Today’s scripture is one of those.

But first, what comes to mind, when I mention the sea? Relaxing on a beach? Playing in the surf? A cruise? Scuba diving or deep sea fishing?

In the ancient world, people did not think of the sea as an enjoyable spot for recreation. It was a menacing, out of control chaos that threatened human existence. The story of Noah’s ark says that the entire world flooded and all life perished except for those preserved on the ark.

Older than Noah’s story was that of a great destructive flood from the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the oldest existing pieces of literature. Similar flood stories are found in ancient Hinduism and Greek mythology. In the ancient world, turbulent waters served not only as a symbol of the harsh forces of nature, but also of illness, oppression, violence – any adversary to human health and wholeness.

To take one example from Scripture, Psalm 69 begins: “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me...More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; many are those who would destroy me.”

So many adversaries are threatening the psalmist, that he compares his lot to drowning. He’s not literally in water; he uses water to symbolize the threat against him.

We underestimate the artistry and sophistication of the gospel writers when we fail to appreciate their use of symbol and story. The late first century Christian community to which Matthew addressed his gospel would have understood that this story addressed their very real situation and the persecution they were enduring.

Today's passage begins with Jesus dismissing a crowd that has come to the shore of the Sea of Galilee to hear him. Then, he tells his disciples to climb into a boat and cross to the other side. Once the disciples shove off, Jesus climbs a mountain to pray. Jesus sends the disciples on a mission without him, and they soon experience supreme separation anxiety.

While they are sailing in their small boat, the sun sets and darkness envelops them. They are far from land when a storm whips up. It is a mariner's nightmare. The sea – actually a large lake – becomes turbulent and potentially deadly. Our passage says that the boat – one of the earliest symbols of the church – is “buffeted by the waves.” However, translated literally, the Greek says the boat was “tortured” or “tormented” by the waves.

Do you remember what was happening to those in the early church? They were being tormented by the religious authorities and tortured by the political authorities.

While the disciples struggle not to be swamped by the angry waters, they see someone marching through the raging storm undaunted. They are terrified by the sight and scream, ‘It’s a ghost!’

It turns out to be Jesus who says, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter, the risk taker in the bunch, decides he would like to give this water walking a try. He ventures into the threatening waters, but when he averts his attention from Jesus to the violent wind, he begins to sink.

Jesus thrusts out his hand and catches Peter before the waves engulf him, and says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt? Jesus and Peter step into the boat and everyone in the tiny vessel worships Jesus.

“You of little faith.” That seems to be the heart of this story. But how you understand *faith* makes a world of difference. Unfortunately, for many people, faith means adopting particular beliefs. Worse, many have been taught that faith means affirming ideas that contradict the natural processes of the universe. Faith means believing in supernatural acts, such as walking on water.

Far too many Christians have been taught that faith means Jesus could perform miracles no one else could perform. So, if you will just grit your teeth and force your mind to believe that Jesus could execute amazing feats that no one else could pull off, you will have genuine faith.

If you take today's passage literally, having an adequate faith means *you* will gain the power to defy all known laws of physics and be able to walk on water. (Jesus accused Peter of having little faith because he could not). If that's what faith is, then not one single follower of Jesus has ever had an adequate faith. Do we really think that Jesus simply wants to make us all feel guilty that we never measure up to his standards?

Faith does not have to mean believing in supernatural acts. Faith means trust. Faith is what I give my heart, mind and soul to. To have faith is to trust that God loves each of us and will never abandon any of us. To have faith is to trust God to give us strength when we face difficulties like a deadly pandemic, or a collapsing economy, or racial injustice, or a divisive political environment. To have faith is to trust God to fill us with courage to do what is right and just in the face of opposition. To have faith is to trust God to give us hope when we are enveloped by dark, stormy seas. To have faith is to trust God to care for us when our earthly journey reaches the end of the road.

Faith such as this transforms us. It changes our approach to life. We approach everything from a particular perspective. And that perspective is this: all of life is a gift.

Episcopal priest, John Claypool, shared a story about a family that had four children and was awaiting a fifth. “A number of people gathered at the hospital the night she was born. She was perfect in every way – except she had no arms or legs. The doctors could not account for this genetic abnormality.”

“However, her parents had great resilience and perseverance, so instead of spending their energy feeling sorry for themselves, they focused on giving their daughter every advantage they could. She lived to be twenty-one and she developed into one of the most beautiful human beings her pastor has ever known. She had a brilliant mind, a wonderful sense of humor, and a great capacity for friendship. Yet never once in her 21 years was she able to dress herself or feed herself or do any of the things most of us take for granted.”

“One time her older brother brought his roommate home from college for the weekend. His friend was a philosophy major who always put life under a microscope and analyzed everything. After witnessing this girl’s life for a couple of days, he asked her, ‘What keeps you from blowing up in anger at God for letting you be born in this condition?’”

“She replied, ‘What I have may not seem like much, but I have been able to see and hear. I’ve been able to smell and taste and feel. I have been exposed to some of the world’s great literature and heard some of the finest music ever composed. I’ve had some of the most wonderful friendships anyone could have. What I have may not seem like much when compared to what other people have, but when compared to never existing at all, I would not have missed being born for anything!’”

“Where did she get the courage to pick up this cruel hand and play it with such relish? Somewhere along the line, she acquired the faith that life is a gift and birth is a windfall, and when compared to never existing, simply being born is better than winning the lottery.”¹

When a gentle breeze is blowing and the waves are calm, it is easy to trust God. But what do we do when a fierce wind strikes and angry waves threaten to swamp us? Do we panic or muster courage? Do we complain about our lot or pull the best out of it we can? Following Jesus is not for the timid; it is not for the easily discouraged. It is for those who know where to put their trust when turbulent waves threaten to pull them under.

NOTE

1. John Claypool, *Stories Jesus Still Tells*, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2000), p.32-33.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Ever-Creating God,

In the beginning, as your Spirit hovered over the watery chaos, you called forth light and life. In another time, you came among us as one who quieted wind and wave and walked across stormy seas. In this age, we long for your Spirit to sweep over us once again, for your Son to calm the storms of our lives, for you to draw order out of our present chaos.

God, sometimes we feel so powerless in the face of turmoil and pain and strife. We do not know how best to respond when storms wreak havoc, or when neighbors turn against neighbors. Yet, we trust that you are present in the midst of brokenness, bringing comfort to those who suffer and empowering others to work for justice. We remember those who suffer the effects of un-ending conflicts or of shocking tragedies that shatter any semblance

of peace. God, draw near to the people of Beirut, we pray, in the wake of Tuesday's horrific blast. Sustain those who sift through the rubble, tend the wounded, and offer comfort to grieving families; give hope to this country in crisis and wisdom to their leaders; and empower our global community to respond with compassion in Lebanon's hour of need. We pray for those in regions affected by recent storms, who now survey the damage and brace for storms yet to come. We lift up those near and far who suffer – openly or in silence – with abuse, addiction, illness, or loss ... Loving God, breathe your healing Spirit upon all in need of your comfort, that they might know your peace and experience your wholeness.

In every age you call us to step out in faith, trusting that Christ is there to support and sustain us. Help us heed your call — despite our doubts, despite our fears. Give us faithful hearts and willing hands that we may use them for your glory. And draw us, we pray, into your redemptive work until all creation knows the abundance of your love and grace.

We pray in the name of the one who calls us – Jesus the Christ – who taught us how to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.