

“Want to Walk on Water?”

Matthew 14: 22-33

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Do you think it is possible to walk on water? Or do think this is a metaphor for having the ability to do things that are only possible to do *with God*?

Three gospel writers record what happened after the disciples set out in the boat. Matthew, Mark and John all record the event of Jesus walking on the water, which lends to the truth of it actually happening. Each Gospel adds a bit of information that is helpful in understanding the context of our reading from Matthew. But only Matthew includes Peter’s brave and failed attempt to get out of the boat to go meet Jesus on the water top. What is it we are to take away from this version of their incredible adventure?

Matthew is writing for Christians who are being persecuted and the focus of this gospel is always directed at the importance of faith, of not fearing and of believing *in* Jesus and waiting for his “come”, such that we are able to accomplish things only God can do.

That day with Jesus must have been amazing because at the end of it their declaration is, “Truly you are the Son of God.”(vs. 32) Around supper time the disciples advised Jesus to send the crowds away so those thousands of people could get food to eat, and Jesus said, “You feed them”. They were shocked at his answer, but even more so at how the bread and fish just kept multiplying until the 5000 men plus their families were fed, ... and there were still leftovers! Incredible – and then Jesus did the strangest thing – rather than celebrating his success with them – John chapter 6 (vs. 15) tells us “... Jesus realized that [the people] were about to come and take him by force to make him king.” This explains why Matthew writes - Jesus *immediately* tells them to get into the boat and go on ahead of him ‘to the other side’ – so the disciples would not get involved in something that was never part of God’s plan. Jesus then dismissed the crowds and went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When Jesus told the disciples to get into the boat it was not a request – and they were obedient. Try to imagine being in that boat with the disciples, out in the middle of the sea, battered by the waves because the wind was against them, - would you be afraid? –I am pretty sure I would be - but there is nothing to suggest that they were afraid – these were seasoned fishermen, used to going up against the elements, used to hard labour and doing whatever ever it took to get the job done – they were brave in many ways – they were not afraid of being tossed about in the boat.

The thing that does make them cry out in fear is when they see the unbelievable – maybe we wouldn’t be so scared having been anesthetized by all the ‘supernatural’

programming we see on TV, but they see something unbelievable their minds cannot process – real people don't walk on water. They were sure they were seeing a ghost and that could only mean there was evil afoot!

Maybe we are thinking at this point, when less than 24 hours ago they had witnessed the feeding of the 5,000, they should have recognized Jesus, ... they should have known he could do anything, ... even walk on water.

But we need to understand their experiences. One of my favourite theological teachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, describes fishermen in this way: "...you could call them superstitious or you could just say how respectful they are of what can happen to you in a boat on the sea in the middle of the night..." When asked about the fourth watch, which is when Jesus was approaching his disciples both Matthew and Mark tells us, one fisherman's eyes got big. "Oh" he said, "that's the watch just before the dawn, when the funny stuff starts to happen... It's just you out there surrounded by black water as far as you can see, ...your eyes start to play tricks on you. You stare at waves long enough and you begin to think you see land, or worse ...rocks rising up in front of you, ... phantom ships drifting...or sea monsters. ... then you start to hear things ... and fear makes you crazy ...so you just row and row and row in the words of Mark's gospel. You keep busy, stay focused and dismiss everything that gets in your way (103-4).

Does that ever happen to you? When surrounded by challenges, when sleep won't come in the night, when there is an unresolved conflict – do our imaginations start to play tricks on us? I think it has happened to me more than once – do we face our fears or just keep busy and ignore it?

In a Bible Study I was facilitating over the previous 6 weeks we were studying this scripture using a book by John Ortberg called, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. One of the participants said to me, "Aren't you ever afraid?" I was surprised by the question and said, "absolutely – there have been times I was paralyzed by fear; times I made bad decisions because of fear; times I failed because of fear."

Fear can squash the desire to learn and grow – Ortberg speaks of children learning to walk as an example - when we are children we are not stopped by the fear of falling as we learn to walk because our desire to walk is so much greater than our fear of falling – we keep trying over and over until we are able to reach our potential for mobility. But somehow as we grow older we learn to fear more and more...we fear what we do not understand, we fear what we cannot control, we fear failure, we fear pain and suffering if we have experienced enough of it, we fear losing financial security, we fear when our lives don't follow the five year plan we made – or we fear the unknown and the unexplainable, like the disciples.

The disciples are afraid ...

Jesus calls out, "Fear not" – and uses the familiar words recorded through the ages "I AM" – which translates to "it is me."

And as we watch this story unfold we see two different responses to fear:

One disciple faces his fear and calls out, and the other disciples in the boat watch and listen – paralyzed.

Peter, known for acting on impulse without thinking things through responds– "Lord, *IF it is you...* " tell me to come. And even though Peter reveals his uncertainty in words reminiscent of challenges spoken to Jesus by Satan and by the Pharisees, Jesus does not rebuke Peter as he did the Pharisees and Satan, ... because Peter is not like them - Jesus knows Peter's heart.... Peter loves Jesus! Peter responds with his heart, and therefore even though he fails, he also achieves because he also learns and gets closer and closer to Jesus because he "dares greatly".

The kind of courage Peter displays is not like that of people who appear courageous because they do dangerous activities – like extreme sports – they are thrill seekers – Peter is not that - he just wants to be with Jesus, doing whatever Jesus is doing – that is courage, that is love, that is about relationship with God – that is being in God's mission.

... Notice he is waiting for the word from Jesus....

I can't help thinking this is really exciting for Jesus to have one disciple who wants to get out of the boat and do what Jesus is doing. Peter is almost child-like with his impetuous request – oblivious to any danger – excited by the prospect of walking on water *with Jesus*.

And Jesus says, "Come."

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

Peter gets out of the boat because the time he has spent with Jesus tells him he can trust Jesus, and sure enough, he's walking on water!!! And then he is challenged by the things he noticed going on around him – challenges – the wind – maybe he remembered the struggle with the wind in the boat and thought this is too tough – he is frightened again – and beginning to sink – he is no longer looking at Jesus – he is looking at what he is doing and where it is happening and thinking this is not possible. And down he goes as he cries out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!"

Isn't that just like us, and every other human being on this earth? We get distracted with bad news, daily chores, world events, work, and a million other demands on our time,

and we take our eyes off of Jesus. We forget how big our God is... until we cry out, "Lord save us!"

A lot of times when we get out of the boat things don't get easier – they get more challenging but God meets us in the midst of challenges, and also in the midst of failures. Every one of us is going to experience failure of some sort in life and it can be one of the most paralyzing things, or we can take action, get up, try again, admit our failures, admit our fears – talk to God about them and determine to go on with the Lord, waiting to hear his, "come"!

And Jesus immediately reached out his hand for Peter and caught him, saying to him, "you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And Jesus immediately reaches out to us with the same admonishment.

We all have choices to make and generally it involves comfort or risk.

Peter suffered public humiliation, but Peter was also the only one who experienced walking on water like Jesus, even if only for a few moments – an experience he would never forget, I would wager, and Peter learned that Jesus was there to rescue him for certain.

Once we experience God's power in our lives, we will never forget it. And the more time we spend with the Lord, the more we get to know the Lord, and the more we may be able to identify where God is at work, and the more we are able to believe God can use even our failures for things in ways that we do not know. And maybe we will be able to ride the waves and not be afraid because we trust that Jesus is right there waiting to immediately reach out and rescue us when we fail.

John Ortberg listed these as lessons we might learn from Matthew 14:22-33:

Wisdom to discern when Jesus is present and how he is calling; courage to get out of the boat; The excitement/euphoria of walking on water; the fear and panic of sinking and failing; the relief that Jesus is right there with hand extended to save; the realization of who Jesus is that leads to worship.

He tells a story of an art class divided in two groups – one group had to make one perfect pot the other group was simply told to make fifty - who do think produced the best the pot? The group that only had to make one was so stressed about pressure and fear of making a good pot they weren't able to excel; the group that had to make 50 pots made the best pots because they learned from their mistakes and tried again - hope keeps us trying, hope that Jesus saves when we fail, hope that there is always another moment of grace.

How big is our God? What keeps us from getting out of the boat and trusting God? The consequences of the size of our God is enormous – if our God is sooo big, we will take risks – if our God is small we get more and more scared – we are afraid to pray. Every time we take a risk and we trust God, our God gets a little bigger because *Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.*

God doesn't always take our weakness away – he lets his strength shine through it – he says *My grace is sufficient for you* and when Jesus steps in the boat there is calm – that is what he does – gives peace/calm within and without.

What keeps us in the boat? These are some of the things others have said: fear of failure, fear of what friends/peers and family will think, fear of losing security, fear of showing weakness. Are we willing to face that fear and tell God we want to go on an adventure with him - Walk on water.

On September 9, we will be celebrating all of the activities happening in this church – and looking for volunteers who are excited about stepping out in faith and making this a *welcoming, growing Christian Community where faith comes alive* so that the world may know how big our God is.

All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Focus quote:

Never try to have more faith – just get to know God better. And because God is faithful, the better you know him, the more you'll trust him. - John Ortberg

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Preaching Life.*(1993) Maryland :Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
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