

“Walking on the Water”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Matthew 14:22-33

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 worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

This morning, we continue in the Gospel of Matthew, picking up where we left off last week. In case you weren't here, Jesus, out of compassion for the tremendous crowds gathered 'round him, had satisfied all their hungers with the assistance of his still mostly incredulous disciples. “You want us to feed 5,000 men plus all the women and children gathered here with five loaves and two fish?” “Do not send them away. Feed them,” Jesus commanded. And they did.

When the crowds had been filled, Jesus sent them home and made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the lake. Still exhausted after learning of the cruel murder of his cousin, John the Baptist, Jesus went up the mountain, by himself, to pray, to rest in the presence of God, and he was there when evening came.

But the disciples were still out on the lake in their boat. The wind had come up against them and they could not get to shore. Battered by the waves, they were stuck mid-way across. But early in the morning, there was Jesus, walking toward them on the sea. They were more terrified of this “ghost” than of the waves. But Jesus said to them: “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.”

Let's pause there for a moment. What's happening here? What is the Gospel story showing us? First, think back to other Bible stories you've heard about water. Remember a few weeks ago when we read the Creation story from Genesis 1? The wind of God swept over the waters, separated the waters, made space for the sky and brought dry land out of the waters. Who controls the waters in that story? God. Who controls the waters in today's story? Jesus. Jesus is showing his disciples that he is indeed the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, water represents a threat to the life of God's people. God's power is revealed in saving the people from the threat of the waters—in the story of Noah and the flood, the story of passing through the waters of the Red Sea to be saved from Pharaoh's army, the story of their entry into the Promised Land through the raging River Jordan. All these stories are about God's sovereign power over all that would threaten and thwart God's purposes.

The disciples knew all these stories. So if Jesus had this same authority and power of the waters as did God, then...then, he must truly be who he said he was. The Son of God.

To make it perfectly clear, when they are not yet ready to make this leap of faith, he says to them: “Take heart. It is I.” It is I. The very same words God said to Moses when, at the burning bush, Moses asked God God's name. Remember that story? Remember how God answered? God said to Moses: “Tell them my name is I am” or “It is I.”

Can you imagine how the disciples must have been feeling at that moment as all this began to become clear to them? You can just see their eyes getting really big and hear their hearts pounding. And not because of the waves. Because of the One standing in front of them who had power over those waves and whose name was the name of God. No wonder Jesus had compassion on them and added: “Do not be afraid.”

And then, a little phrase in the story meant more for us than for those first disciples because they wouldn't get it—yet: “early in the morning, he came walking toward them.” Early in the morning? What Bible stories does that make us remember? How about Easter, when early in the morning Mary Magdalene and the other disciples discovered that the tomb was empty?

Wow, zow. It's all here. The power of God, now in Jesus, to feed the hungry crowds as with manna from heaven. The power of God, now in Jesus, to reveal power through compassion. The power of God, now in Jesus, over the raging waters. The power of God, now in Jesus, to bring life from death. And Jesus says: “Do not be afraid.” Because the power of God is greater than anything, anything, that could drown, or crush, or starve, or destroy you. Greater than anything. Do not be afraid.”

Calls to mind the old hymn text of Charles Albert Tindley: “when the storms of life are raging, stand by me. When the storms of life are raging, stand by me. When the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea, thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me.”

When the storms of life are raging.... well, the storms of life, the storms of war, have certainly been raging all this past week. Threats and counter-threats. North Korean nuclear warheads aimed at Guam. Do you know where Guam is? It's a 210-square mile U.S. island territory in Micronesia in the Western Pacific. Way out, about 4000 miles west of Hawaii, south of Japan, east of the Philippines. A major strategic U.S. military base is there, home to about several thousand American troops.

Do you realize that Guam is part of our California-Pacific annual conference, part of our Hawaii District? Pastor Osias and congregation, our brothers and sisters in Christ, will be worshipping today at the church in Mangilao.

Whenever the storms of life are raging, we feel out of control, powerless, frightened, just like those early disciples stuck in the middle of the stormy lake in their little boat. I can't really imagine how the people on Guam are feeling this morning. On Thursday, I looked at

the newspaper before writing this sermon and saw that North Korea was claiming to attack in four days. That would be today. How we hope it was just blustery talk.

I thought of something I hadn't remembered in a long time. When I was in grade school, a hundred years ago, we had weekly Duck and Cover drills. These drills were to prepare us in case of an attack by the Soviet Union. How they were going to bomb all the way to Phoenix, Arizona, I'm not sure. And how our small school desks were going to protect us, I have no idea. But we were going to be prepared! Each Friday a signal would sound and we'd all climb under our desks at school and cover our heads with our hands until the drill was over. We were admonished not to make a sound, as if the slightest sneeze or whimper might give us away.

The specific memory that came back to me was of one such drill. It was just after my birthday. My grandmother had given me a gold watch on a chain that I wore as a necklace. I loved that watch. But when I climbed under my desk for the drill, the ticking of the watch seemed so loud that I became convinced that it would give us all away. I can still remember how afraid I was for those few minutes that seemed to last forever.

May we and all our brothers and sisters on Guam, in Japan, in Hawaii, as the storms of life rage over the waters of the Pacific Ocean this day, may we hear, in our heart of hearts, the voice of Jesus, walking on the water and saying: "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

Do you know that variations on that phrase "do not be afraid" appear some 83 times in the Old Testament and 25 times in the New Testament? It is the most-repeated command from God in all of Scripture, repeated even more times throughout the books of the Bible than the command to love. Do not be afraid, people. I am your God. I am with you. And I will give you power to live by faith rather than fear.

Sometimes, don't we know? That's so much easier said than done. When the storms of life are raging—be that the bellicosity of war threats, or something much more personal—a frightening medical diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, being bullied at school...when the storms of life are raging, Jesus with us, walking towards us on the water, saying: "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

Let's circle back around to Peter as we conclude this morning. Remember the stories a couple weeks ago of the mustard seed and the pinch of yeast? How Jesus used images of the smallest of things to teach us about the Kingdom of Heaven? Jesus knew that through our smallest efforts, our stammering words, our imperfect attempts, a few halting steps on the water.... the Kingdom of Heaven becomes incarnate in this world. The Spirit of God is present and alive even in the smallest of our actions, our words, our prayers.

Peter only needed a small mustard seed sized faith that day. He cried out and Jesus immediately reached out his hand and saved him from drowning. "Ah, Peter, Peter," he must have thought. Your faith is still the faith of a beginner. Remember: "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

In these frightening times, when the storms of life are raging, though our faith be as small as a mustard seed or a pinch of yeast, let us remain in the company of the Prince of Peace, our savior, Christ the Lord. To walk on the water at the command of Jesus is to walk towards or into the Kingdom of Heaven, where, in the words of the prophet, Isaiah:

God shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Let us raise our voices, urging calm and restraint. And let us join in prayer: for peace on the Korean Peninsula, for peace in the hearts of our leaders, for peace among all peoples, for peace in our hearts.

And to this mustard seed sized act of courage and faith, Jesus will say: "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

Amen.

Notes:

Iwan Russell-Jones in *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 3*. Barlett and Taylor, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

Statement from the UM General Board of Church and Society:
www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/a-call-to-prayer-for-a-just-peace-510

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