

A Walk on the Sea

Following the miraculous feeding of the five thousand near the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat. They were to go ahead to the other side while Jesus dismissed the crowds. He then went up onto the mountain by himself and he prayed.

The Sea of Galilee is about 8 miles across and 16 miles long. It is set in a unique geographical location. It is surrounded by hills that have an elevation of 2000 feet, but the lake itself is at almost 700 feet below sea level. The cool air coming off the hills meets with the relatively warm air of the sea and the shorelines. This clash of air temperatures makes the sea prone to sudden winds and violent storms. The disciples were on the sea, as evening came and the skies grew dark, a storm arose. The winds picked up, the waves increased, and the boat, now far from land, was taking This continued for a long time, through the hours of the night. Matthew writes that the storm came in the evening, and what happens next took place early in the morning. That means the disciples had been battling the storm for hours. They are now exhausted and completely worn out, physically and emotionally, and were in fear for their lives.

In the middle of the wind and sea, Jesus is approaching the boat, walking on the water. But these tired and weary disciples don't understand. They are seeing something they cannot believe: some figure, something moving toward them in the dark. The winds are still howling, the waves still tossing the boat on the dark water, and now they see this. The disciples are terrified, and as one Bible translation puts it, they started screaming out in terror, "It is a ghost!"

Jesus calls out to them with these very comforting words, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” The root word for heart and courage is the same: it is the word “cor.” And here we come to one of the most memorable and dynamic moments of the whole story. Peter, bless his heart, and I mean that, calls out to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus says simply, “Come.”

What Peter does is remarkable. I have heard some folks, including preachers, criticize Peter for his actions that stormy morning out on the sea. Some say that he was being impetuous and too strong-willed as always. I have heard Peter described as a person lacking in faith, pointing to how quickly he started to sink into the sea. I don't see it that way. Here are the disciples, tired, battling a storm all night, afraid they might not make to safety. When all seems darkest, they see what they imagine to be a ghost. Yet when Peter learns it is Jesus, he is the one that responds, He is the one who boldly says, “Lord, if it is you, call me, and I will follow.”

The storm is still raging. The wind and seas are still churning. That little boat is still getting kicked around, taking on water. If it had been me, I would have asked Jesus to come over to me, here in the boat, or I would have asked Jesus to please do something about calming the winds and the waves first, then we can continue the conversation. Peter could have stayed where he was, with the others in the boat – that would be reasonable.

Remember when Jesus first called the disciples – it was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, on a nice day. It was there that Jesus first called, “Come, follow me,” and they followed. But now, Peter is in the middle of the storm, being asked by Jesus to walk farther out into it, on the water.

And Peter took heart, just as Jesus had asked him to do. He put it his little amount of faith into action. At the first invitation, as soon as Jesus says no more than “Come,” Peter climbs over the edge of the boat. Can you imagine doing that! He climbs over the edge of the boat in the middle of the storm, and puts his ordinary feet onto, or into the water. And here’s what happens: he started walking on the water to meet his beloved friend and Lord. Peter did something that as far as I know, the rest of us have never done: he began to walk on water.

What an incredible act of courage. I once did a little canoeing when I was on a vacation in Minnesota. It was frightening enough getting *into* the canoe. Your balance must be right. The other passengers in the canoe need to be still. And this was on shore, with boat still tied to the dock. I can hardly imagine what it would be like to be on that boat in the middle of the lake, in the dark, in a storm, and choose to step *out* of a boat and onto the sea, simply because I heard Jesus call me.

Of course, Peter only lasts so long with such brilliant faith. It wasn’t long before he noticed the winds and waves and storm all around him. He may have looked down at his feet and suddenly thought, “Good heavens, there isn’t anything at all holding me up!” Simon, whose nickname is Peter, which literally means rock – God bless him, he begins to sink like a stone. And this is like all of us: when we begin to take our eyes off Jesus, when our doubts and fears begin take over, we begin to sink.

Yet even there, as the story shows us, we are not left to our own ups and downs of faith and fear. As we call for help, Jesus our Lord is there to reach out and save us, just as he was for Peter. “You of little faith,” Jesus says to Peter, and to us. As you picture the scene of Jesus and Peter on the water, I want you to imagine this as a compliment rather than a condemnation. “You have a little faith,” Jesus tells him.

“Just a little faith, and that is powerful! Look what you were able to do: you walked on water! Why did you doubt? I was here, and we were doing fine.”

Peter, like the rest of us humans, has his doubts, and yes, he sinks, only a few moments after his little miracle moment. But the good news is that this did not hinder the power of Jesus. Storms, winds, the boat taking on water and sinking – Jesus can deal with all of that. Jesus is there to bring peace. The story continues as the two friends return to the boat, and it is only then, when they get through it, that the winds stop. Now, there is quiet, and the group of disciples offer worship and praise.

This gospel story began with peace and prayer, as Jesus was on the mountain, and it ends in peace and prayer, with the disciples and Jesus at rest, on the other side of the dark, terrible night, and dawn is about to break over the calm sea. In between there was the storm. And so it is with our lives. We have moments of peace and prayer, such as this hour on Sunday morning, and our daily times of prayer with God. But much of our life is lived out there, upon the waters, in between the coastlines, out where the storms do their best to toss us around. When things grow dark and the storms rage around us, there may be times when we become frightened, or start to sink.

This story is a real-life parable, one that the disciples, including you and me, can look to. This story asks us if even then, during the storms, will we choose to have faith. Do we listen more to the storms, or more to Jesus? Do we listen to the noise that fills our ears and the howling winds that shake our hearts with fear, or do we listen to the one who knows us and calls us? Do we hear Jesus telling us to take heart, because he promises to be with us, always? Do we choose to take those first steps of faith, even while our feet are getting wet?

The truth is sudden storms can happen anywhere. We cannot always predict the when and where, but we do know that every journey is going to have its share of rough weather: storms in our individual lives, our communities, our church, our country, or ones that affect the whole world. Things can be going along quite smoothly, as we expected, when suddenly, a storm arises. We lose our job. There is a sickness or disease that strikes a loved one or us. We have financial problems, or family problems. There is a death in the family. The world goes through a pandemic for several years that took the lives of millions. Those calm waters of our lives become unsteady and turbulent, and before we know it, things are unpredictable and frightening. We may even wonder at times if, or how we are going to make it.

Sailors or not, we have all had to deal with unexpected, rocky weather. We have all been through a storm or two, or twenty, or two hundred, and we will most likely continue to deal with storms no matter who we are or where we are going. This gospel story speaks to our own human and sometimes stormy journey.

Know this: great things are achieved when we hold onto even a little faith, when it is still dark, and we step out in courage. Miracles can happen when we venture out of the safety and security of our boat and move toward Jesus. I imagine that many of you could tell of times in your own life when God helped you to take courage, and to keep going, and in time, on the other side of the storm, you came to realize that with God, you were part of something extraordinary, maybe even miraculous.

Reflect on this gospel story and how it speaks to your life. It is Jesus who calls us, in good weather and bad. It is Jesus who watches over us and prays for us. It is Jesus who is walking nearby, even if we don't recognize him, even when our hearts tremble and we fear we are about to perish. It is Jesus who asks you once more to trust and follow.

May God give us the courage to step out in faith, to follow, and to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Wondrous things can happen, as we place our faith, and our very lives into our Savior's loving hands. Amen.

Trace Browning

Proper 14, 11th Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

1 Kings 19:9-18 • Psalm 85:8-13 • Romans 10:5-15 • Matthew 14:22-33

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