WALKING ON WATER

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Texts: Isaiah 43:1-3a and Matthew 14:22-36

Several weeks ago, I spoke with the references for a candidate for our Associate Pastor position, as I have done with several candidates along the way. This candidate’s references were particularly glowing with statements like “super smart and gifted”, “creative and a joy to work with”, “great ability to relate to all ages”, “almost humble to a fault”, “works well with all ages”, “amazing with children”, “a gem”. When I later spoke with the candidate and indicated that I had spoken with the references, I said, “So I hear you walk on water?” It is an expression that finds its way into conversations outside of the biblical story. Walking on water has become synonymous with being extraordinary, exceptional, or simply great at whatever one does. And while no one takes it literally today, the image is rooted in this account of Jesus and the disciples that we heard from Matthew’s gospel.

After healing the sick and feeding the five thousand, Jesus had sent the disciples on their way and had gone up on the mountain to pray. He had tried to escape to a solitary place earlier in the day, but the crowd and disciples had followed him, and out of compassion for them he had stayed with them until evening when – after a long day – he had gone up the mountain to pray, alone at last! In Matthew’s gospel the mountain is the place where holy things happen, like the Sermon on the Mount and the Transfiguration. It is on the mountain that Moses talked with God and received the Ten Commandments, and on another mountain that Elijah encountered God in the sound of sheer silence. So, it was to the mountain that Jesus went to pray, though sometimes I wonder if maybe he was just looking for a moment’s peace away from the crowds and pesky disciples.

Sometimes you just need some time and space for peace and quiet, time to rest, recharge, and refresh your spirit, time away from others and the to do lists and the hectic pace of life, time away from the technology that haunts our days and nights with pings and dings and rings and other annoying things. Living here between the Alleghenies and the Blue Ridge, escaping to a mountain from time to time as Jesus did may offer a helpful, holy space and time. Jesus seemed to find that important in his ministry; perhaps we who are running the rat race should follow his example before we collapse, for if Jesus needed time to rest and pray, surely we need it too – not as a luxury, but as a holy necessity! So it was that Jesus was on the mountain while the disciples were on the sea.

It was early in the morning near dawn’s early light when the disciples looked out across a restless sea and saw the ghostly figure walking toward them on the water. It had been a long night in the boat on the sea fighting the wind and waves. They were weary, worried, and worn – and somewhat perplexed. Jesus had sent them out on those waters after he had fed the five thousand with a handful of fish and loaves in a miracle they still didn’t grasp. “How did he do that?” they wondered. Five thousand people had been fed with virtually nothing – five loaves and two fish – and somehow, after all had eaten, twelve baskets of table scraps were left over. As the wind blew and the waves buffeted the boat and the disciples worked to stay afloat, they wondered how that happened and who he really was and what would happen next. Then the figure came walking across the water toward them like a ghost, and even the bravest of fishermen among them trembled – as would you, as would I.

“Take heart,” the ghostly figure said. “Do not be afraid. It is I.” Right! That statement, “It is I,” “ego eimi” in the Greek, is the same response given by God to Moses at the Burning Bush when Moses asks the divine name of God.[[1]](#endnote-1) “Who shall I say sent me,” he asks. “Tell them YHWH sent you,” says God. In the Hebrew that four consonant response can mean I AM or I AM WHO I AM or I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE; in the Septuagint which is the Greek translation of that Hebrew name, the words are “ego eimi”, “IT IS I.” Jesus’ response to the disciples on the sea echoes that same divine name of God! I AM. IT IS I. In Jesus’ walking on the water, the power of God is at work in a uniquely divine way that transcends human possibility. Like feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish, walking on the water is a miracle that reveals something of who Jesus is and the power he holds – the power of YHWH, the LORD!

Amid the trembling disciples on the boat, Peter alone dared to speak. There were many times when Peter may have wished he hadn’t spoken so quickly – may have wished he had thought a little longer before he spoke or simply remained silent. Standing on the mountaintop with the transfigured Jesus, Moses, and Elijah before him, Peter blurts out, “Let me build you something?” As Jesus reaches to wash his feet Peter declares, “Not mine, Lord.” Standing near the fire in the courtyard of the high priest on the night of Jesus’ arrest, Peter will say, “I do not know him!” and then the cock crows. But in this instance, on this night, on this rolling sea where all the disciples are scared silent, Peter alone dares to speak to the ghost walking on water. He says not “Is it really you, Jesus?” but “Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.” It is not enough to hear the voice; he wants a sign to confirm it – a sign that confirms that not only is this Jesus who can walk on water, but Jesus who can make others walk on water as well. “Come,” says Jesus. And perhaps Peter regretted speaking so quickly in this instance too as he decided whether to trust the voice and step out onto the waves, or whether to stay in the safety of the boat.

As I have said before, faith is not believing that someone can push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope stretched across the Grand Canyon. Faith is getting in the wheelbarrow. Faith is not believing that the Lord is walking across the water and inviting you to do likewise, faith is getting out of the boat and stepping onto the waves. Peter did just that. He left the safety of the boat and his fellow disciples, stepped out onto the waves, and began walking across the water. Check the text! It wasn’t ***just*** Jesus who walked on the water that morning; it was Peter too. This wasn’t the act of a supernatural Christ who could defy the laws of nature; this was the power of God at work in Jesus and in Peter through faith. Peter believed enough to put his foot onto the water and to walk, step by step, toward Jesus. None of the other disciples came clamoring overboard after him; they all stayed where they were. Peter alone dared to go.

With his first step out of the boat onto the water, Peter demonstrated faith not only in who Jesus was, but in what he could do. Yet, it wasn’t long before Peter’s faith began to falter; he got distracted by the wind and his fear returned and he began to sink. Life is full of distractions that tempt us to focus our attention, time, and energies elsewhere. Some of them offer pleasure and some of them offer worry and some of them offer promises of wealth or status, but all of them distract you from God and ultimately sink you – as the Prodigal Son and Zacchaeus and a host of others across the ages have discovered. For Peter it was fear that caused him to sink, fear that transcended his faith in Jesus.

In his book *United*, Cory Booker quotes his father, saying: “[*F]ear cuts off possibilities, faith expands them; fear locks doors, faith opens them; fear hides, but faith takes risks*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) He could have been describing this story! In faith Peter stepped out of that boat; he imagined a new possibility – walking on water – and he took a risk; and then in fear he began to sink. Again and again, Jesus tells us, “Do not be afraid.” In this very passage those were his opening words to the disciples in the boat, “Do not be afraid.” Yet we continue to harbor fears that sink us. Fears are fanned by politicians who demonize their opponents and paint apocalyptic pictures of the future if their opponents are elected. Fear of “the other” fans the flames of racism, homophobia, and xenophobia that plague our nation and world. Fears are preyed upon by autocrats who present themselves as the only solution to your problems and by gun manufacturers who claim their products are the only way to protect yourself and by some preachers who think they can somehow scare the hell out of you in order to get you to heaven!

Faith conquers fear! “Do not be afraid,” says Jesus. “It is I. I am with you!” Regardless of what we are afraid, Jesus is there to reassure us and to extend a hand to grasp us and pull us up and save us, just as he saved Peter, while gently chiding us for our lack of faith. “Trust me,” he says. “Follow me,” he says. “You of little faith, why do you doubt?”

Why doubt indeed? We can recount the ways God has acted in our lives and in the lives of saints in our midst and in the lives of would-be-saints in this holy space who have experienced the grace of God and an abundance of God’s blessings. We can look to the future with hope at what God may yet do in us and through us. We have so many stories of God’s faithfulness and saving grace! We have so few reasons to doubt and so many good reasons to trust God. Why then do you doubt, you of little faith? You can stay in the boat with your doubts and fight the storms alone, or you can step out in faith and test the waters and put your hand in the hand of the man who walked on the water, the man who says, “It is I! Come, follow me. Do not be afraid anymore!” Amen

1. Iwan Russell-Jones, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol.3, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., Westminster John Knox Press:2011, p.336 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cary Booker, Cory Booker’s father, quoted by Cory Booker, *United*, Ballantine Books: New York, 2016, p.25 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)