

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 77:11-20

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples. With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. (Selah) When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

New Testament Lessons—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."

For me, this is one of those top three or four stories that quickly comes to mind when you think about the miracles of Jesus. Maybe you might also think of, say, turning water to wine, the raising of Lazarus, multiplying bread and fish that feed thousands of people...

Of course, all of Jesus' miracles are extraordinary in their own way, but this is one of those *iconic* stories that really captures the imagination, isn't it? Christ *walks on water*—mystifying his disciples back then and today.

It's an act that's so amazing, so unbelievable, that it's actually frightening! Jesus' friends are straight up *scared* because this goes so obviously against the laws of nature.

Everybody knows this isn't the way water works, the way the world works. Huddled in the boat, they can still feel the waves shifting under them—the Sea of Galilee still a bit unsettled from the storm overnight.

Matthew tells us it's early in the morning. The disciples are surely exhausted after a sleepless night at sea. I imagine their senses aren't quite as sharp as they would normally be.

I mean, I certainly know *mine* aren't at their best before nine or ten and especially not before I've had the elixir of life loaded with sugar and cream. This year's Montreat crew can definitely attest to that reality.

I, too, recently spent a lot of time around a lake with some very late nights at camp this summer. It's hard for me to problem solve or plan things in the wee hours, so I've great sympathy for Jesus' friends here.

I'm not sure what the Galilean equivalent of Nessie would be, but that's probably what I would've seen approaching me on the water at that hour.

It's no wonder, perhaps, that those on the boat—squinting through the early morning mist rising from the sea—cry out in fear—barely able to make out some ghostlike figure approaching them. And they've got nowhere to run—nowhere even to swim, because, you know...

You see, Jesus never gave them any kind of heads-up that he'd be doing this. Given how spectacular—how supernatural his route of choice was, it would've been good to mention, don't you think?

“Ok, guys...I've been peopling all day and I'm tired. I'm going to send y'all ahead across the lake so I can recover and reenergize and spend some time alone—just me and God.”

(I know I can't *prove* that Jesus was an introvert like me, but I think I could make a good case.)

“Oh, and by the way guys, I'll meet up with you shortly after dawn. Y'all know how I like my early morning walks on the beach. Who knows, I might take a shortcut and stroll across the water to catch up.”

“Sounds like a plan, Jesus. We'll see you in the morning—Wait, you're going to do what, now?”

No heads-up. Instead, Christ reunites with his disciples, without warning, in one of the most dramatic ways one can imagine. And as he approaches the boat, an equally dramatic scene unfolds, particularly between Jesus and that most chatty of followers, Peter.

Peter's kind of like my cat, Chloe...God knows I love her and would do anything for her. But, Lord, she never stops meowing. Come to think of it, she doesn't really take well to water either. And I don't think she understands a thing I'm trying to teach her.

What takes place there on the Sea of Galilee that morning is nothing short of jaw-dropping, leaving us wonderstruck, leaving us intrigued...

And though I resonate with all those feels, Matthew's story also leaves me with several questions. The biggest question I have is, “Why?” Why does Jesus do this? Why does he decide to demonstrate this particular ability—to walk on water?

For the most part, Christ's miracles have a clear purpose. We can quickly figure out the reasons for these acts of power. For example, Jesus' many healings come from a deep well of compassion in his heart, but they sometimes also highlight the sick person's faith and Jesus' power to forgive sins.

Consider turning water to wine a master class in radical hospitality. There's the cursing of the fig tree; remember that one? I mean, Jesus was frustrated and angry and (what can you say?) it was just right there—wrong place, wrong time. Or how about bringing Lazarus back to life? Christ's own grief and that of his friends prompt him to act, pointing all the while to God's power over death.

And what about our text from last Sunday—the feeding of the five thousand? Lots of people, not a lot of food, and thousands of hangry folks don't make for a receptive congregation. On a completely separate note, I promise lunch is just around the corner!

But Jesus didn't *have* to this. He didn't have to meet up with the disciples this way. He wasn't in a rush—wasn't trying to keep a schedule. He could've gone the long way around, I suppose. So if that's the case, was this miracle we find so striking today done simply out of practicality or convenience? Seems like a lackluster reason for Jesus to thwart the laws of nature.

What's more, I'm hard-pressed to believe he would demonstrate power for the sake of demonstrating power, as if he was just showing off: "Hey, bet you wish you could do this!"

No, of course Jesus isn't some braggart or (worse) some prankster plotting a dicey, early morning scare.

Now, I'm not suggesting everything in Scripture needs to have a logical explanation. The stories of the Bible can't and shouldn't be "explained" away. In my view, if you go too far down that road, it will usually lead to a frustrating, unsatisfying, dead end.

That being said, when it comes to this passage, I keep coming back to the question of Jesus' motivation. We know the unexpected variable was the storm that pushed the boat out farther than planned. But remember, Jesus waits until *morning* to start walking towards them. What could've been his intent?

To be blunt, it's a tall order trying to get inside the thoughts of our Lord and Savior and God's Word made flesh.

So, in this case, I think your guess is as good as mine; which, I know is really disappointing. But the good news is that *Matthew's*—the actual *storyteller's*—intention for this whole episode is much clearer.

Walking on water and Christ's remarkable exchange with Peter both push us towards this climactic confession of faith: *And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."*

For Matthew, that's what it's all about. That's the primary message he wants to communicate—the main thrust of that pre-dawn hike on the lake—to help the early Church and the present Church come to believe that Jesus is, has always been, and will always be the Son of God.

Pretty cut and dry, in my view...Jesus is the One—the One that heaven and earth have been anticipating with bated breath and expectant joy. And, in fact, this simple truth is the driving force behind all of Matthew, not to mention all of Mark, Luke, and John.

Except...this provocative dialogue Jesus has with Peter seems to go beyond that basic premise of all four gospels. It adds nuance and some flavor to what it means that Jesus of Nazareth, specifically, is the Son of God.

Could've made the point convincingly enough with Jesus walking on water and calming the winds as he came aboard. But Peter's attempt to walk towards him on those same waters gives us some insight into the kind of messiah Jesus has come to be.

Spoiler alert: Not the kind anyone is expecting.

As I was praying and pondering over this story last week, I found myself reflecting on Christ's question to Peter after he began to sink and received Jesus' extended hand: *"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"* You of little faith, why did you doubt?

And then (somewhat jokingly to myself), I started referring to this as the story of "Doubting Peter" (not as some dig against Peter but against all the Thomas haters).

But as I thought more about that doubt, it opened up new avenues of thought for me...

Did Peter doubt Jesus's power to help him walk on water? We know the strong winds quickly eroded any confidence he had in that department.

Deep down, did he doubt Jesus' ability or willingness to rescue him should he sink? Or, perhaps the most important question: In those moments, was Peter still doubting this was Jesus in front of him—or that Jesus actually was who he said and demonstrated he was: the Son of God?

When his friends cry out in fear, Jesus approaches the boat and speaks calmly and with assurance: "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*" Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid...

Unfortunately, that translation isn't accurate. It glosses over the magnitude of Jesus' greeting—one that's meant to still their troubled spirits. The original Greek reads like this: Take heart, I AM. Take heart, I AM.

Deep in their fears and doubts, Christ gives them the name of God: I AM WHO I AM.

Deep in their anxieties and exhaustion, Christ says, "God is with you."

And yet, we know this whole ordeal was Peter, essentially, testing Jesus: "If you are who you say you are, you'll command me to come to you and I'll be able to do it."

But let's be honest, friends. Peter and the others aren't alone in holding fast to their doubts, despite so much evidence to the contrary looking them right in the face. We're with them, too. We share their doubts even when God is staring right at us.

When it comes to the volume of our worries and fears these days—when it comes to the weight of our doubts and anxieties, I think we're gonna need a bigger boat to carry them.

Siblings in Christ, I'm not sure what his precise motive was that morning, but I do know our Lord showed up as God always does. I know our reservations and what ails us can be stubborn and persistent and that Christ's hand will still always be right there waiting...just in case they become too much to bear.

Through Matthew's story, our doubts are exposed. Our fears and anxieties are revealed. And that's okay! Because none of these will ever prevent our Lord from meeting us where we are. None of these could ever question Christ's commitment to save us from the waters of chaos threatening to overwhelm us.

For, with God, even water can become a firm foundation of faith. With Jesus present, the winds of life don't have to seem as dangerous. No, there can be peace within our confusion and struggles. Friends: With God, nothing is impossible. With God, we can do more than just *tread* water. If Jesus calls us and empowers us, then yes—we can *walk* on it.

I'll leave you with this...Perhaps you're thinking that that's an easy thing to say, but a different matter altogether to believe. After all, the disciples actually *witnessed* Jesus walking on water, and even that didn't swallow up their doubts entirely.

That's true. And yet, I'd argue that if we're willing to look for them—if we're paying attention, we will see glimpses of gospel all around us. We'll discover the promises of God in our daily lives. And if we work at it, my friends, the stories of Scripture just may come to life in our midst.

Amen.