

“Whose Waves Are They?”

Matthew 14:22-33

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • November 17, 2013

Last week we looked at the story of Jesus miraculously feeding nearly 15,000 people with only a few pieces of bread and a couple of tiny fish. I warned you that because of our familiarity with the story we could miss the meaning, which was really about the identity and ability of Jesus.

Today's lesson is another story that most people are at least familiar with, the story of Jesus and then Peter walking on the water. Thousands of sermons have been preached about this passage and most of them have focused on Peter's faith that led him to get out of the boat and then his lack of faith that caused him to sink. The point of those sermons is usually “try harder to keep your eyes on Jesus so you won't fail as much.”

There are a couple of problems with that message, though. First, it can be very discouraging to us when we're more like the other eleven disciples who stayed in the boat. Nowhere in this passage does Jesus tell any of his disciples to “try harder.” Not that we shouldn't try harder to be more like Jesus, but that's not the main point in this passage. The second issue is that this passage is not primarily about Peter. It's about Jesus. If we focus all our attention on Peter we miss the real meaning.

When everyone had finished eating the bread and fish and they had picked up all the leftovers, Matthew tells us that Jesus “immediately” made his disciples get back in the boat and start back across the lake while he stayed behind to dismiss the crowds. Matthew doesn't elaborate on why he wanted the disciples to leave in such a hurry. But in the Gospel of John we learn that the crowd was so thrilled with the miracle of the bread and fish that they wanted to take Jesus by force and make him their king. Jesus, of course, was the true king but his time had not come yet. This was the same temptation

Satan had used in the wilderness offering Jesus all the kingdoms of the world without having to go to the cross.

Jesus may have thought that his disciples would be tempted to go along with the idea and so wanted to separate them from the crowd. He also wanted to be alone to pray to the Father. You might think that Jesus, being fully divine, had no need to pray. But he was also fully human and prayer is how he was in the Father's presence. The Bible records a number of times that Jesus went off alone to pray. So it's safe to assume that it was a regular practice of his.

It seems to me that if Jesus needed to pray in order to be in God the Father's presence, how much more do you and I need to spend significant time in prayer? I think it's safe to say that none of us prays as much as we need to. We see in this passage that Jesus prayed for hours. We're told that he dismissed the crowds in the evening, probably around 6 or 7 p.m. and that he walked out to the disciples in the boat “in the fourth watch of the night,” which would have been between 3 and 6 a.m. Jesus prayed for eight hours or more. I don't know about you but I'm lucky to pray for thirty minutes in a day.

From where Jesus sat on the mountain and prayed he could see his disciples in the boat. Some time during their trip a storm came up so that they found themselves trying to row into the wind. If you've ever tried that you know how exhausting it can be. They rowed and rowed for hours but weren't making very much progress. Around 4 a.m. they look in the distance and they see a shadowy figure coming toward them. Many of these men had been fishermen and had spent lots of time around the water. They knew the properties of water and they knew that it was impossible for a person to walk on it. Verse 26 says, “But when the disciples saw

him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' and they cried out in fear."

Some Bible scholars have pointed out that because of their faith the disciples would not have believed in ghosts. Instead, they probably assumed that the figure they saw was some kind of omen signifying that they were doomed.

Jesus hears them scream and knows what they're thinking. Verse 27 says, "But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.'" This is one of the places that we tend to miss the deeper meaning. In the Greek, the words translated as "it is I" are *ego eimi*, which literally means "I am." But there's more to it than that. Both those words can be translated as "I am," so that Jesus is saying, "I am, I am." This is the way the Greek version of the Old Testament renders the divine name of God in Exodus 3:14, "I am who I am." When Jesus says, "*ego eimi*," he's equating himself with God. Walking on the water merely confirms what Jesus is saying about himself.

In the Bible, mastery over the sea is reserved for God alone. In Exodus God parts the sea for the Israelites to escape slavery in Egypt. In the story of Jonah, God uses a storm on the sea to accomplish his purpose with the prophet. Our Call to Worship today came from Psalm 107 which describes God sending a storm on the sea and then later calming it. And our reading from Job says that God "trampled the waves." Once again we see Jesus doing things that only God can do.

Peter, who is always the impetuous one, answers Jesus and says, "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water." Many people point to this and say, "look at Peter's great faith." But you can also see a good measure of skepticism. Peter says, "IF it's you." He doesn't seem convinced, so he asks for an impossible sign. But Jesus doesn't scold him for it, instead he says, "come on."

And so Peter does what no other person besides Jesus has ever done. He walks on the water. But then he notices the raging storm around him. He takes his eyes off Jesus, loses his focus and begins to sink. I'm sure I would do the same thing.

Remember, though, that this is primarily about Jesus. The important thing here is that Jesus never takes his eyes off Peter. When Peter begins to sink he cries out, "Lord, save me." This is the moment of true faith, not the walking on the water. When he was in trouble he had the sense to call out to the only one who could save him and *immediately* Jesus reached out and took hold of Peter. The passage ends with Peter and Jesus getting back into the boat. When they did the wind stopped and the disciples all bowed down to Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

As I study this passage I think there are three things you and I need to take away from it. First, everyone has storms. Difficulties are a part of life. Becoming a follower of Jesus does not end pain or suffering or difficult circumstances. These storms of life have the power to distract us from trusting Christ. Like Peter we "see the wind" and take our eyes off the Savior.

Some of you are going through some kind of storm in your life right now. If not you've either been through something or you will in the future. And so the second point is that Jesus cares about the storms in your life. That doesn't mean that he will rescue you from them right away, but he will rescue you at the right time. Jesus watched from the mountain for hours while the disciples struggled against the wind. But he wasn't idle. Jesus prayed. He most certainly prayed for his disciples during that time and he prays for you. Jesus, who is at the right hand of the Father, intercedes for us.

In addition to praying, Jesus comes to us in our struggles. He came to the disciples walking on the water. The water was the very

source of their fears and Jesus came to them in a way that showed them that he was greater than their fears. That's the story of the empty tomb on Easter. Jesus has conquered our greatest fear. He promised that he would be with us always, to the end of the age. So Jesus prays for us and he comes to us, but he does more than that, he calms the storm. He is able to stop whatever storms are in your life.

Finally, in this passage we see the importance of faith. Peter had faith that Jesus could save him. Charles Spurgeon said that "Peter was nearer his Lord when he was sinking than when he was walking." But what do we mean by faith? There are three essential elements of faith and true faith requires all three. First is *knowledge*. To have faith we must first know the truth about who Jesus is. That truth is found in the pages of Scripture. But knowledge is not enough.

There are atheists who have knowledge of the Bible. Satan even knows Jesus' true identity. In addition to knowledge is *assent* or *agreement*. We must agree to the truth, believing that the Scriptures really are true. The third component of faith is *trust*.

True faith involves trusting Jesus as Lord of our lives, committing ourselves to his work. This is what these young people have done in confirmation. They have learned what the Bible says about Jesus, they have accepted that it's the truth, and they have made a public profession of trust in Jesus as their only Lord and Savior. Like Peter crying out, "Save me, Lord," faith means trusting this God who prays for us, who comes to us, who calms the storms in our lives, and who sends us out into the world to share the truth with others, doing the work of Christ.

Amen