

What Jesus Does

Menno Mennonite Church

August 20, 2023

Purpose: To recall the story of Jesus coming to the disciples as a reflection on the divine nature.

Message: The good news, always, is that Jesus comes to us even when we find ourselves sinking.

Scripture: Matthew 14:21-28 (I will read); Psalm 85:8-13

Synopsis: Walking on water is quite a feat. So much so that this among all the biblical allusions had entered the common idiom to mean those without a flaw, leaving out the part that there has only ever been one who has ever accomplished this space—Christ himself. Often we read this happening and Peter’s failure along these lines—that had Peter (the stand in for all humanity) would have just performed adequately he too would have walked on the water. Yet this story speaks far more deeply to the work of the triune God and how God responds to the world and its challenges: they come even where we least expect and call us to faith not in our own potential, but in the working of God and the anticipation of the God’s steadying hand even where we often least expect God to be—in the midst of the storms that so readily rock us.

Matthew 14:21-28

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone,
²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

²⁹ He said, "Come."

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Have you heard of the phenomena described by Moore's Law? It is a computer science principal that notes that the number of transistors on a integrated circuit, those things that run our world and our lives these days, doubles every 2 years. This is important because the number of transistors dictates the number of circuits in the chip, or, in more sensible terms, the amount of power that our gizmos can accomplish. This has held true for decades, only stalling out now as we try to take the next leap to density which has held the chip makers up far longer than they are used to. Yet the state of the art even now boggles the imagination. A period at the end of a printed sentence can contain the equivalent of 6 million tri-gate transistors, the basic building blocks of the digital world. Sooner or later we will go smaller and more powerful still and we will have a whole new generation of gizmos and their consequences to deal with.

I mention this not solely to indulge my long standing nerdy tendencies for the arcane and digital, but to draw a parallel to human life. For quite some time we have expected that we humans too function in similar fashion, expanding our capacity in predictable and ever increasing fashion. The insistence on the potential we have, largely untapped, to alter our world had occupied futurists and fantasists alike for decades on end. The expectation of positive human potential that is ever expanding and capable of just about anything. There are projects to merry the human mind with the computers we have built. As considerable and encompassing as human capacity is—for good and for bad—I always find a flaw in the notion that our capacity knows no limits, especially when it comes to the spiritual realm. Indeed, there are profound limitations to our capacity for belief, hope, and promise, even if we do like to try to ignore those facts.

I mention this because the fundamental way that this story gets told and preached is on the basis of human potential. We come to this in basically the same way all the time—posing a question of if only and what if: what is Peter has not failed the test but only had sufficient faith to keep his eye on the prize? What is we would rely more on faith and less on self? What might we accomplish? We are to be Peters, daring to step out of the boat and dare to trust Jesus in all things and see the spectacular results. The focus here becomes Peter and not Jesus; the message here becomes the little-disciple-who-could-had-he-just-kept-walking.

Can we always be challenged towards more faith? Of course we can. Yet the basic diagnosis of faith when the storms of life come for us—and they do come with frequency and ferocity—is that it is a time and test of our capacity toward faith and the successful trusting

adequately to see us through to the other side. With enough faith you can walk your way all the way to Jesus. Which sounds great and all, but deep down can take us to some pretty weird places. Logically, it also means that we have to rely on our ability to be god-like in the worst places of our lives; that we need to be Jesus like in our faith in the worst times of our lives, and if we aren't, if our faith fails to defy the forces of physics and the world as we know it, then the problem is really about you after all. Which is not much of a comfort when all you are after is for someone to make the storms to stop, or at the very least to come and be in the boat and let us know that everything is going to be alright. In some ways, the human potential reading here places us in an even tougher place. Because it doesn't particularly comfort us when the storms of life is raging, and what's more it is apparently my failure to access my potential and transcend what is going on that is causing the problem.

Another way to think about it is to wonder where does Jesus fits in our lives as savior and friend if our responsibility is to acquire enough faith in order to do all the stuff that Jesus does for us? Isn't this just another version of the humanistic atheism that seems to be all the rage? I think that this is a temptation that we Anabaptists are particularly prone to. We place a huge amount of emphasis on the emulation of Christ. Our purpose in the world is to be Christ like in all ways and all times. And rightly so—it is a worth while and worthy project. We come from stock that believes that faith MUST show itself in life as a response to the passive faith that is also so prevalent and so dangerous. Yet it is not without its hazards. But the end of this can lead us to a place where no goodness is sufficiently good, and no ethics are sufficiently pure for the truest of true believers. It can lead us into the temptation of assuming that it is our ability to be Christ like that makes the difference and not the working of Christ in us despite our persistent ability to forget and lose the plot. There is a reason why there is so much time tying between the inspiration of faithful living to the Spirit that authors and sustains it. Or to put it another way, it is not about us, but God in us that we do what we do, and that makes a huge difference. Our faith is proved by the life we lead, not the stunts of faith that we execute, faithful or not. We might walk on water, but only because the Lord wills it.

So what else might we be taught from this encounter than “be like Peter, only this time, don't look down?” There are several things.

First of all, we need to note what is going on here. Jesus is appearing in the middle of the night in the middle of the storm in the middle of the lake. The disciples have concluded that they

are dealing with the supernatural here and walking on the water is, ultimately, Peter's idea. Do you catch that? This is Peter doing this *in order to prove that this is actually Jesus that we are dealing with here*. Jesus does not invite or suggest that he comes, just accepts the request that Peter is implementing to prove who they are dealing with. No body puts him up to it except Peter. It is a great story and it is great faith, but it is as much about Peter being Peter, or, I think, Peter being the stand in for all things human and our quest to make sure it really is Jesus rather than being the emblem of how to do faith for time immemorial. Perhaps this is Peter demonstrating his lack of faith requiring a proof of Jesus and making things simply harder than they strictly need to be, and reminding us of our human inclination to do precisely that all the time than anything else. I don't know about you, but that sounds like my human condition. I specialize in making things way harder than what they actually need to be.

Second, we believe what we see. We can get so focused on the miracle of the walking on water here that we can forget the other circumstances: the disciples are scared witless with everything going on around them. They see their doom so they are inclined to believe that it is what they are facing. Their failure was not finding a storm in a boat terrifying. Their failure was conflating the presence of the waves and winds with the absence of God. They gave into the most human of frailties that holds that calm waters are the only reasonable sign that God is present and active. It is the most pervasive and persistent of lies of the human condition and one that we have to struggle to maintain perspective on most and remember that just because we cannot always see God does not mean that God is not there.

Third, despite our inclination, always to do what Jesus did it is not always the best thing to do when the heat is on. Most of the time we are far better off remembering what Jesus has done first. I cannot tell you how many times I have come to conclude that there would be no way to make it through the challenges of life. One of the challenges of offering a meditation on the scriptures on a regular basis is starting, always, with a blank page. More times than not, despite approaching 2 decades of doing so, I am given to the suspicion that the page may well just stay blank—and I will end up with egg on my face. Yet I have yet to be left for want of words; they may not be the best words or be as eloquent or effective as I would always wish them to be, but the words have come and keep coming by what I can only understand as the working of the Spirit. God provides and has continued to provide. One would hope and think that I might begin to trust and expect that rather than beat myself over the head with regularity. And

this is but the mundanity of life and living. What about the bigger things that we have seen the other side of we know not how? All I have needed thy hand has provided. What a thing to rely on, yet what an easy thing to forget.

Perhaps when Jesus says to Peter “Oh ye of little faith” he isn’t talking about getting his sandals wet. Maybe instead it was simply forgetting who they were dealing with in the first place.

They have seen Jesus cure all those who came to him causing amazement where ever he goes. They have wondered that demons obey him. They had seen him calm the waves just several chapters before this. Just this afternoon they saw him provide for the 5000 with plenty left over beside. And now when they find themselves in the middle of the seas and the storms and the one coming to them in the way that they cannot fathom is a Ghost? Perhaps the comment was more about forgetting who they were dealing with in the first place.

We are awfully good at forgetting. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber puts it best: “Faith isn’t you doing the impossible—it is remembering that God can and has and will do the impossible. To know faith is to know that God is God and we don’t have to be.” And that is indeed good news.

So friends: none of us are supposed to walk on water. If the storms of life are raging for you at the moment, I invite you to remember: the winds can be terrifying and the waves can crash, but that does not mean God is far off. We forget what God has done, and it can be hard to hear Jesus’ invitation to take courage over the roar of what we are sure is going to kill us. So we look for Ghosts and not for God. Instead of looking and knowing that we are not alone. Instead of trusting to remember that it can be enough to but utter: Lord, Save us.

For when you do, that is what happens. Perhaps not as your would have designed, but the Lord catches us all the same. God never tires of finding and saving us; never tires of rescuing us, never tires of finding us in the midst of the storm.

Thanks be to God.