

"All in the Same Boat"

Pastor Hubert, Pinegrove, August 7. Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

It's got to be the most famous miracle story there is: Jesus walking on water... It's so famous, it's become part of popular culture, as we can see in this clip from the popular series, "Just for Laughs", the Quebec version of Candid Camera: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLSIHYbedII.

The only difference between this video and the Bible story is that instead of a floundering Peter we now have a floating beach ball that gets saved from the water.

Of course a Bible story that's become part of modern popular culture is even more legendary in the church. It's my guess that most of us here must have heard at least twenty different sermons about it. And it's also my guess that those sermons are all about poor Peter, the disciple who took his eyes off Jesus and nearly drowns as a result. His faith falters, but Jesus is there to save him. So, those sermons conclude: be brave, get out of the boat, but keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Sounds familiar?



Well, in this twenty-first sermon of this passage you are going to hear something different. Sure, getting out of the boat and keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus might be good encouragement for some folks to put their faith into action, but it does miss the point of the story. After all, when Peter gets back in the boat, the other disciples don't praise him for trying to walk on water and wish him better luck next time!

The hero in this story is not Peter, the real hero is Jesus whom the disciples finally recognize as the Son of God. It's not about Peter's lack of faith – it's about Jesus who makes the disciples finally see who he is: the Son of God.

The very early Christian church for which Matthew intended this story would have understood this immediately. They would have picked up on the powerful symbolism that this story is infused with.

Let's begin with the lake itself. In the old Jewish tradition, lakes and the sea are strange and symbolic places, especially at night, as in this story. They hold deep and dark secrets that cannot be seen from the surface. It's where mystery dwells; danger and chaos lurk there.

Just think of the well-known first opening lines in our Bible: "In the beginning, the earth was *formless and desolate* (we're talking chaos here). The raging seas that covered everything was engulfed in total *darkness*."

Chaos, raging waters, darkness... the exact same scenario as in Matthew! Next, we read: "And the spirit of God was *moving over the waters*." In Matthew, it's *Jesus* who moves over the waters... Matthew uses this familiar and powerful symbolism to make clear that with Jesus around, God-like things happen.



We can see that same fear of deep dark waters in ancient Western legends. Remember King Arthur, how got his magic sword Excalibur? It came out of a bottomless lake, handed to him by the mysterious Lady in the Lake. And to this day we still hear legends of monsters in lakes, the monster of Loch Ness just one of them; and don't forget our own monster Ogopogo, living in Lake Okanagan!

The Jewish tradition has those stories, too: think of the sea monster Leviathan. Jonah and the whale. Noah and the Ark. The passage through the Red Sea. We still use that same symbolism when someone is baptized: in baptism, the water symbolizes death, the old self dying and a new self born again.

So here we have the disciples crossing the lake at night, fighting the elements: fighting the powers of chaos. Water is sloshing over the railing, foam spraying their faces. Muscles aching trying to stay on course. It's around that moment of the night just before sunrise, between slumber and being awake, when unusual things can happen.

And then... this ghostly apparition comes toward them, ignoring the wind and the waves. And Peter, recognizing Jesus before his brains tell him it's impossible, jumps over board without thinking.

Peter is the type of guy who will always act on impulse, who has no problem taking risks, skip the details. By the same token it's also Peter's biggest flaw, Peter the man named Rock: because he only responds out of his emotions, he quickly gets distracted by the wind and the waves and begins to sink. Well, what else to expect of a rock...?

As I said, limiting his story to an invitation to get out of the boat, keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus misses the point. On the contrary this story is *not* an invitation to step over board and walk on the sea like Jesus. In fact,, this story shows what happens if you *do* try to walk on water. Only Jesus can do that, only Jesus controls the powers of chaos and death. If anything, that's what the story seems to tell us.

So does Matthew use Peter as a good example of what *not* to do?

Not quite. Peter did *something* right: as he finds himself in over his head and sinking like, well, a rock, he shouts, "Lord, save me!". At least he got that part right: realizing he got himself into a mess, he knows he cannot save himself – and reaches out to Jesus.

Jesus demonstrates that only he is Lord of the waves, sea wind and sky; only he is Lord over chaos and death. That's why at the end of the story, instead of just wondering what sort of person Jesus is, the disciples finally and for the first time see Jesus for who he really is: the Son of God, the one who has power over death and chaos. Not just their friend Jesus, and certainly not a ghost, but God's own Son. Not because he performed some cool trick like walking on water – but because of what "walking on water" really means: they now understand that chaos and death have no hold on Jesus. So no wonder that the raging sea calms down as soon as Jesus steps on board.

Then the boat; there's also something very symbolic about a boat. Ships and boats are among the earliest symbols for Christianity. Because a ship is not something static; the whole deal of a boat is to *get* somewhere. And boats can encounter some choppy waters.

So, just as in those chicken jokes we may ask, *why* did Jesus and the disciples cross the sea? Because they wanted to get to the other side, of course! But unlike those chicken jokes, "the other side" was unknown and possibly even dangerous territory. And yet they went there, to minister to people who lived there; to build outposts of God's kingdom on earth in places they hadn't been yet. *That's* what it means to be church, then just as much as now.



We belong in that same boat, that ship we call the church. And like the disciples in Matthew's story, we may not be in for an easy ride: water is sloshing over the railing, foam spraying our faces, maybe our muscles are aching just trying to stay the course. And just as those disciples in our story, we may be afraid of scary things coming our way - but we don't have to be afraid because it's not all up to us. We may be in over our head like Peter, but Jesus has joined us in the boat, pointing the way, never staying in one spot.

So let us keep moving onward and forward, and let us dare to take chances, dare to venture into daunting places - and not be nervous because Christ is with us. Let us never stay put, but always be on the move, building outposts of God's Kingdom on earth wherever we go – and leave walking on water to Jesus.

Amen.