

## Water Walking

When I was in seminary I remember talking to another student I had known in a previous life. We were comparing our seminary experiences, talking about the highs and lows. I mentioned a professor who I thought was especially outstanding. The guy smiled and said, “Yeah; he walks on water.”

I’ve heard that expression used a few times since to refer to someone who is brilliant or so far above normal human capabilities, someone who can seemingly do no wrong.

The reference, of course, is to today’s Scripture reading; and I think it’s helpful to keep in mind this modern usage.

Peter is sometimes viewed as a headstrong buffoon in this story and sometimes as a person who, despite Jesus’ biting critique of him, shows a daring amount of courage. I think he’s actually some of both. And make no mistake, the story has a lot more to say to us about Peter than it does about Jesus.

We don’t really understand what Jesus is up to in this story. The episode appears to happen the day after the feeding of the multitude, and it begins with Jesus making the disciples get into the boat with instructions to head for the other side of the lake.

It’s an interesting choice of words—*he made them get into the boat*. There’s a little more of an edge to that statement than we might expect. It implies that the disciples did not want to get in the boat.

Maybe they didn’t appreciate being so summarily sent packing in front of the crowd after Jesus’ earlier rebuke of them. Maybe they were concerned that an already exhausted Jesus was going to try to work this crowd without any help. Maybe they just didn’t want to miss what Jesus was going to say. But the bottom line is, they’re not happy.

It also appears that Jesus really did want them to go away—as fast as possible. Could it be that he was so frustrated by their poor response to the feeding of the multitude that he needed to get away from them, too?

All we know is that sometime after disciples left, Jesus dismissed the crowds and went up the mountain to be by himself. At long last, he was determined to get his alone time with God. He stayed out there alone, all evening.

Meanwhile, things were not going well for the disciples. They did not have all that far to sail. The Sea of Galilee is really a lake and not a sea, and they were only crossing a small part of it to get from the wilderness on the northeast side of the lake to Gennesaret on the northwest side. We're talking about a distance of less than 10 miles here.

But the Sea of Galilee was, and still is to this day, notorious for the sudden violent storms that blow up, seemingly out of nowhere--where winds come roaring down the hills and sweep over the water. For this reason, boats seldom sailed far from shore, and sailors were on constant alert for storms.

As luck would have it, the disciples ran into one of these storms. They could not make any headway against the wind. They struggled for their lives out on the lake all day and all through the night.

I might question whether they could have made so little progress in all that time, except for what a guide told us once on a boat cruise as we approached a small island just a mile off Peninsula State Park in Door County.

You can rent kayaks at the park to row out to the island. One family did this on a clear day. After spending a pleasant afternoon on the island, they got into their kayaks to head back. Strong winds suddenly came up.

The kayak never made it back to the park beach. Search boats and planes were sent out and it was not until the next morning that the kayak was located, its occupants cold, exhausted, but alive, more than 20 miles away in the opposite direction from where they started.

Make no mistake, the disciples were in a dangerous situation. They weren't novices when it came to boats, some of them were professional fishermen, yet it took all their skill and strength to stay upright and keep plowing ahead into the gale.

Early in the morning, while they were still fighting the storm, they suddenly saw this figure walking toward them over the waves.

In Biblical times, the sea was often viewed as the home of evil spirits. In the creation story, Genesis 1 says that when God formed the world, he first had to do something with the dark, watery chaos that existed. The Spirit of God swept over the waves and tamed those unruly forces and brought forth life. But those forces were still lurking in the deeps, waiting for incautious victims.

So disciples are facing two of the worst terrors known to people of their time: they are fighting with an angry sea that threatens to send them to a watery grave, and now in the early morning light, they see a mysterious specter coming at them. Something obviously supernatural because it is walking on the water.

The first thing that comes to mind is a ghost. They feel that they are literally caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. The Bible says, "They cried out in fear." Which basically means they're screaming some form of, "We're all going to die!"

Jesus tries to calm them down, saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Have you noticed how many times people in the Bible are told, "Do not be afraid!" Yeah, telling people who are scared out of their wits, "Do not be afraid," is seldom effective.

It doesn't work this time either. Peter at least has the courage to answer. He isn't convinced this apparition is Jesus. In fact, his first words are, "Lord, if it *is* you." Then he devised a test to find out if it really is Jesus.

"Command me to come to you on the water."

There are so many things wrong with this statement it's hard to know where to begin.

Given the abrupt way they parted, I wonder if there was some leftover tension between Jesus and the disciples from the feeding of the multitude. Were the disciples a bit frosted because Jesus made them go in the boat and sent them into this dangerous storm? It almost seems like Peter has had with being jerked around.

This time he's not going to wait for whatever crazy notion Jesus has in mind. Peter takes matters into his own hand. He still pays lip service to the idea that Jesus is called the shots by offering to obey a terrifying command from Jesus to step out into the roiling water.

But who really gave the command? Whose bright idea was it for Peter to step out of the boat? It was not Jesus' idea. Jesus did not want Peter out there trying to walk on water. That kind of activity is beyond the reach of humans. Peter was the one who decided he wanted to do it.

The appropriate thing for Peter to say, would be, "Is it really you, Jesus? I am so glad you are here. Please have mercy on all of us and save us from the storm."

Instead, he asks Jesus to do him a big personal favor. It's as if the others in the boat don't even exist. He's thinking only of himself.

Worse yet, he did ask politely. He did not say, "Jesus, I know this is asking a lot, but would it be possible for you to give us the kind of power that humans can only dream of—walking on water?"

Instead, his attitude was, "I want the power to walk on water like a god. He gives Jesus the command. He tells him to say, "Command me to come to you on the water," and seems to expect Jesus to follow these orders.

Surprisingly, Jesus does. Why would he do that? He is the master. He has all the power. He can make his lowly disciple do whatever he wants him to do, just as he made him get in the boat yesterday.

We would expect Jesus to say, "Excuse me, I don't take orders from you. If I wanted you to get out of the boat, I would have told you to get out of the boat. Now sit down, close your mouth, and don't ever talk to me that way again."

If Jesus were the authoritarian ruler that we so often describe God as being, he would have said something like that. But he didn't, and that's a detail we should pay attention to, because it shows how God acts in the world.

Too many Christians in our day equate God with raw power. As if God calls all the shots, and whatever happens in the world happens because God makes it happen.

That's not the view we get here. The core characteristic of God is not the wielding of absolute power but rather of quietly doing whatever love requires. God acts in this world not by overpowering people with might, but by surrounding them with a loving presence.

So he does not tell Peter to sit down and shut up, and remember his place, even though that would be the smart thing for Peter to do. There is a better way of showing Peter where life comes from, of reminding Peter that he is not the center of the universe, but a human being made to live in harmony with his brothers on the boat and with the rest of God's creation.

Rather than overwhelming Peter with his authority, Jesus lets Peter experience the result of living the way he wants, as if he were the center of the universe:

*You want to be in charge? You want to call the shots? Okay, Peter, we'll do it your way and see what happens."*

What happens is that Peter's strong faith gets him out into the water. He's probably very proud of his faith—for a moment. Until he discovers that his faith was not so much in Jesus as it was in what he thought he could get Jesus to do. He thought he could get Jesus to do his bidding and let him walk on water.

What seemed like faith in Jesus was really only faith in his ability to get God to follow his plan. Which is why Jesus needles him with that, "you of little faith" comment.

Peter discovered the cold, wet truth that he's an ordinary human after all. That he doesn't have it all figured out. That putting all of his faith in himself is putting it in the wrong place. Only when things get desperate and he started sinking under the waves, does he put his faith, or maybe it's only a frantic hope, in the one who can save him.

The point of the story is not that Peter was exceptionally stupid, or arrogant, or faithless. The story is a reminder to all of us of what it means to be human. It is a reminder not to confuse strong faith in God with faith in what we can get God to do for us.

We all do that to some degree. On so many of the issues of today, there is a temptation to think we're proclaiming our faith in God, when really we're just proclaiming our faith in our ability to get God to do what we want. We do not look to the Bible for guidance, but for ammunition.

"Here's what I think, and I will search the Bible from cover to cover to find a verse that I can interpret in such a way as to justify my position." Or if I'm not that energetic, I will just assume that since I believe it, it must be in the Bible somewhere. I've heard

people justify actions and beliefs by quoting Bible verses that don't exist. People can do terrible things in the name of Christ.

It is so easy to pretend that God is leading when really we are calling the shots. Especially if we don't trust where God might lead us.

Now God could break in with a thunderous voice and tell us to sit down, shut up, and listen. But the New Testament teaches us that God acts not by overpowering people, but by surrounding them with a loving presence.

So God gives us the option of calling the shots. God lets us get away with trying to manipulate God's actions to our liking, and lets the consequences take their course. And when we find we've gotten in way over our heads and are sliding into disaster, when we finally understand that putting ourselves at the center leads to death, we desperately call for help. God then reaches in and pulls us out.

Did Peter have powerful faith? In a way.

But there is a key disclaimer. If Jesus had invited Peter to get out of the boat, Peter might have been scared, but his strong faith would have prompted him to do it, and he would have had an amazing experience.

Since it was Peter's idea, and a selfish one at that, and not something God wanted him to do, his strong faith ended up nearly drowning him.

Whether we follow God of our own choice or are driven to do so in desperation from our own bungling, God will get us where we need to go. As Peter discovered, God is not in need of backseat drivers, or self-styled press secretaries, or holy warriors.

Jesus is not in need of disciples who have a powerful faith that God will do whatever they think God should do. He is not in need of disciples who want Jesus to make them better or more powerful or more successful than other people. He is not in need of disciples who want to walk on water.

Jesus is seeking to those who trust God to the point that, even in the stormiest weather of their lives, they are content to walk where God leads.