

Proper 12B: Mark 6:45-52
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
July 28, 2024

In the Same Boat

There is an old story told in the Eastern Church about a devout abbot, who decided to take a prolonged spiritual retreat in a small cabin located on a remote island in the middle of a large lake. He told his fellow monks that he wanted to spend his days in prayer so as to grow closer to God. For six months he remained on the island with no other person seeing him or hearing from him in all that time. But then one day, as two monks were standing near the shore washing their laundry, they could see in the distance a figure moving toward them. It was the abbot, walking on water, and coming toward the shore. After the abbot passed by the two monks and continued on to the monastery, one monk turned to the other and said, "All these months in prayer and the abbot is still as stingy as ever. After all, the ferry only costs 25 cents!"

Humor aside, what this little story does is remind us of how easily we may sometimes miss the significance of something that is right in front of us. This can surely be said about another story involving walking on water, the one we just heard from the Gospel of Mark.

This passage picks up where we left off last week—Jesus has just fed the 5000 with the loaves and fishes, and the guests have all been sent home. Jesus now excuses himself to retreat to a mountain to pray. Meanwhile the disciples return by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. They didn't make much progress, though, as the headwinds were strong, so much so that after rowing for half the night, they were still only halfway there. Jesus, having finished his praying, then stands on the shore and sees the disciples straining at the oars. He sets out in their direction, looking like he was going to walk right past them. But then the disciples see him—see him *walking on the water!*—and freak out. They think he is a ghost. Jesus answers with some encouraging words, climbs into the boat, the wind dies down and they land in Gennesaret, a few miles short of their intended destination.

Now, as far as miracle stories go, this one is rather ambiguous. Already in Mark, Jesus has shown himself able to perform amazing feats, like healing the sick, casting out demons, calming a storm, multiplying loaves and fishes, even raising a dead girl. The thing about all these miracles is that they were in response to an immediate need—someone in Jesus' presence was sick, or hungry, or possessed or dead. And the miracles were performed with the aim of encouraging faith—in the crowd or just in the disciples. But his walking on water here was for no such higher purpose: Why did Jesus cross the sea? *To get to the other side.* I mean, his ride had left without him, cell phone coverage was not great where he was so he couldn't call an Uber or whatever was the equivalent in the 1st century. He had no choice but to "hoof it." And the most direct path was across the sea. Now, that would not have been an option for most of us, but it *was* apparently an option for Jesus.

The disciples, seeing someone walking on the waves, were understandably disturbed. Imagine you're on one of those big cruise ships, and you look out your porthole window and you see

some guy strolling by on the waves. Not something you see every day! Probably enough to cause you to scream. Now remember it's night in Mark's story, everything is dark, the disciples can't see anything. But then they see someone—*something*—coming towards them, hovering over the water. Nothing they know accounts for what they are seeing with their own eyes. This is something strange, extraordinary, supernatural—a ghost, a spirit, a demon? What's worse, they don't know what its designs towards them are. This is something strange, extraordinary, supernatural—a ghost, a spirit, a demon? What's worse, you don't know what its designs are towards you. Is it Caspar the Friendly Ghost or one of those spirits that haunt people in horror movies?

Fact is, few of us today are at all astonished at the idea of Jesus walking on water. We have grown up—most of us—with these stories, stories of Jesus' supernatural deeds—the healings, the exorcisms, his commanding forces of nature. And so we hear today about him walking on water and we are not shocked, not surprised. Of course he did that. How else was he going to get back? Fly? That'd be too flashy.

Indeed, we know Jesus to be divine and so his walking on water is just proof of what we already know. Jesus is God and has "God-powers." And in fact, what Jesus did fits how other parts of Scripture speak of God. Job 9 says that God "walks on the waves of the sea." And Isaiah speaks of God making "a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters." And so we recognize this story to be what people call a 'theophany,' a manifestation of God, a revelation of Jesus' divinity.

In the two thousand years since Mark's Gospel was written, Christians have become not just comfortable with the idea of Jesus being more than human, superhuman, being God; we in fact assume it. So much so that sometimes we forget that Jesus was a human being. But that was, however, not the case with Jesus' first followers. Those who followed him from town to town had no doubt that Jesus was human. Never questioned it. He was a man just like them. He could be seen and touched; his words heard like those of anyone else. Jesus got tired, got hungry, needed to sleep, just like any man. What was harder for them to accept was that Jesus was anything more than a man. They might have granted that he was a prophet, someone who spoke directly with God and for God, but prophets are human too.

But then they had to reckon with how Jesus would do all these crazy, astounding things—healings, exorcisms and other miracles. They couldn't wrap their brains around what it all meant. They couldn't see that Jesus, while human, was also God. "Their hearts were hardened," Mark says. They didn't get it, their view of God didn't allow for it.

You see, the way the disciples thought of "God" was not too far from how most people think of God today—God is "out there," "above" us, removed, transcendent, outside of our reality, unaffected by the vicissitudes of life, unconstrained by the forces of nature. Oh, God can on occasion affect things in this world—in miracles, say, but these were truly extraordinary, rare, once every couple of centuries, maybe. But by and large, God is separate from us, set apart, above the world, not mixed up with it.

And this story of Jesus walking on the water conforms to that view. Jesus walks over the surface of the water, suggesting surface-level, superficial engagement. He walks over the roiling waves,

the chaos of life, and remains above it. He stands aloof, unaffected by it, certainly not threatened by it, not afraid that he'll be swamped by it, drowned.

And if this is indeed how God is, existing above the chaos but also unmoved by the plight of us who have to labor in it—if *that* is how God is, then no wonder the disciples are scared—it means we're all sunk. If God stands apart and doesn't care, then we are in trouble. For, there's no one coming to save us. We are on our own.

And as I said, this is the view of a lot of people. God exists...out there...but it remains to be seen if he cares, if He is going to get involved, or if we are on our own to make the best of it. And of course, because of our limitations and failings and our bent towards selfishness and sin, when we act this way, when we try to go it alone, we find ourselves struggling against insurmountable headwinds, as the disciples were, getting nowhere.

But what is amazing about this story isn't that Jesus walks on water. That is easy enough to accept, for us Christians anyway. What is much harder for us to fathom is what happens next. The disciples see Jesus on the waves, and they cry out in fear. Jesus stops his stroll and hollers back, "Take heart, it is I." Or more accurately, "Take heart, I AM." *Ego eimi* in Greek. For those of you who aren't Greek scholars, *ego eimi*, I AM is what God says when He's talking with Moses at the Burning Bush. God tells Moses that he's going to free his people from slavery. And when Moses asks what should he tell them when they ask who has sent him, God says, "Tell them I AM sent you." I AM, or *Yahweh* in Hebrew, is the great sacred name of God, the name God reveals to his people. And it is what Jesus says to allay the fears of the disciples: "Take heart, it is I. It is I AM." Never fear, God is here.

This may yet seem something of a platitude, an empty promise, except that the next thing Jesus does is he climbs into the boat with them. This is significant. Jesus, the Son of God, who does things only God can do, who stands above the world, above the fray, gives up his transcendence in order to be with his disciples, to be with us. Jesus, being God, could remain aloof and detached but chooses instead to put himself in the same boat as us.

I can't help but see this as the embodiment, the acting out of the mystery of the Incarnation as Paul describes it in his letter to the Philippians: "Christ," he says, "did not count equality with God as a thing to be clung to, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, being born into the likeness of man. And being in human form, humbled himself becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Jesus empties himself, relinquishes his prerogatives, his privileges and immunities, to become human, to be with us. God could remain aloof, walking on the surface of creation, uninvolved and unmoved, but instead he takes his place beside us, becoming Emmanuel, God with us.

This story of Jesus walking on the water is more than a miracle story. It is a story about the transcendent becoming immanent, about God coming to be with us, and by extension about how we find God *in this world*, not apart from it. God dwells in the presence of his people.

Now, this understanding has obvious implications for how we approach the sacraments, seeing them as earthly means by which we come to God and God comes to us. But it also has something to say about how we approach our Christian calling more generally.

You know, a lot of us dread being criticized for being “so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good.” But the truth is, as CS Lewis observed, that “If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven,” he advised, “and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”

As Christians we stand astride the boundary of two worlds: our mind and hearts in heaven and our hands and feet on the earth. Yet our mission, our job is not to simply to “stand in the gap” or to resign ourselves to “living in the tension” between the two, as if we were holding on to two ropes being pulled in opposite directions. In Jesus that tension, that struggle, our futile straining against the wind, is overcome, transformed into the grace-filled life, a life that is animated by a supernatural power beyond this world, but which seeks to have an impact *in this world*, witnessing to God and God’s will on earth. This is possible because God refuses to stay at a distance, to keep it superficial, but chose to come down to us, to join us in the fray, to suffer with us, for us, and thus to show us how to live heaven on earth. And for that we say, Thanks be to God!