

Matthew 14:22–33 (NRSV)

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Stormy Seas

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Matthew 14:22–33

In 1971 Andrew Lloyd Webber’s irreverent musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar* hit the Broadway stage. Opening to a good deal of controversy, the show gradually became a classic, and the 1973 film adaptation ranked eighth in revenues that year. Much of the show was tongue-in-cheek, which offended some. I found its light-hearted spoofing fun, which will be no surprise to those who know my sense of humor.

One of my favorite songs from the show is sung by King Herod. Herod is interrogating Jesus at his kangaroo court leading up to the crucifixion. Herod tells Jesus, “Just show me you can do all the things I’ve heard about”—raise the dead, heal the lame and so on—“and then he’ll let you go.” In one verse Herod sings, “So if you are the Christ/ You’re the great Jesus Christ /Prove to me that You’re no fool /Walk across my swimming pool.

Only when I went to Israel did I realize that Herod actually had swimming pools, scores of them. I had thought it was a playful anachronism in the musical. Either way, it’s a humorous verse, I think.

But like the rest of the musical, like all good satire, there is a thoughtful point just under the surface. Walking on water. The ability is something special. It’s the stuff of the gods. It’s the stuff of dreams. Like flying, it’s that compelling thing that we sometimes do in our reveries, but something in our waking hours we know is fantasy.

And yet we are drawn to the idea. Da Vinci designed special shoes to walk on water. According to the New York Times in the last 150 years over a hundred U.S. patents have been granted for walking on water machines. But in ancient lore walking on water wasn’t the stuff of inventors, it was the realm of the divine. Herod was ready to believe Jesus was divine. All he had to do was walk across his swimming pool.

This morning Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee. It’s the story Herod had heard about. But in this morning’s passage, perhaps more surprising, Peter, the human disciple, walks on water, too. And it’s here that the story gets even more interesting. We, unlike Herod, don’t doubt that Jesus can walk on water. But Peter, that’s a different story. Peter, the man, walks on water. That fact alone tells the story wants us to understand something important.

Listen to the crucial details. The disciples set out in a boat on calm seas. Suddenly a storm arose. We pick it up as Jesus approaches the frightened disciples in the boat on the stormy sea. This is from *The Message*, a more informal translation or paraphrase than the New Revised Standard Version.

“But Jesus was quick to comfort them. “Courage, it’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

Peter, suddenly bold, said, “Master, if it’s really you, call me to come to you on the water.”

He said, “Come ahead.”

Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, “Master, save me!”

Jesus didn't hesitate. He reached down and grabbed his hand. Then he said, "Faint-heart, what got into you?"

The two of them climbed into the boat, and Jesus quieted the wind.

Interestingly, there is story from Buddhism that is quite similar. An old Jataka tale tells of a lay brother who is on his way to see a master. He is deep in thought about the Buddha. He arrives at the edge of a river and absentmindedly walks onto the water. But reaching the middle, he becomes aware of the turbulence of the water, his concentration of thought on the Buddha wavers, and he begins to sink. Only a redoubling of his efforts to focus thought on the Buddha keeps him from sinking and enables him to gain the opposite shore.¹

What do these old fantastical stories have to do with us? Even if walking on water remains an intriguing human idea, we, in this age, don't really expect that even the strongest faith or focused concentration will allow us to actually walk on water. But you know what? I don't think the miracle, or the exact nature of the miracle, was important in the Buddhist story or in the Gospel either.

These are stories about life, life in which we encounter storms great and small. They are stories about how we sometimes face the storms with calm and confidence, and how sometimes they terrify us and threaten to sink us. They are stories as old as the world's oldest civilizations and as new as the things each of us faces this morning. They are stories of figures in famous epics, and they are stories about people as regular as you and me.

So, what can these stories tell us? How can they help us?

Well, let's start with the fact that life is full of storms, often frightening and unnerving storms. If you are like me, this is not your favorite piece of information. I don't want to hear that storms are inevitable, a part of living. I want to hear that if I do things right, there won't be any storms. If I work hard, if I'm honest, if I am compassionate things will work out perfectly.

There is a real trap here. I knew of a minister once who was famous for inspiring his congregation to do things for the church. The only problem was that he implied that if you devoted your life to the church, you would avoid trouble in your life. What he told people fit perfectly with what they wanted to believe. Trouble was, of course, that many of these devoted parishioners faced trouble in their lives. Their families fell apart. They lost their jobs. Loved ones died unexpectedly. Severe illness overcame some. And the pastor's implied promise was worse than no promise at all. Some of the parishioners felt they had been betrayed by God. Others thought they had been lied to. And some were ashamed that they had been so foolishly duped. And more than a few thought they still weren't good enough for God's rewards.

Even on a small lake like the Sea of Galilee, storms can suddenly arise. It's life. None of us is helped by believing that right living or being right with God will eliminate life's storms. It's a setup for pain and disappointment.

Another thing the stories can tell us, though, is that it is possible, sometimes, to find calm in the storm. The Buddha's disciple, focused on the Buddha, didn't notice the waves. Peter, trusting Jesus, was able to get out of the boat and stay afloat, even though a few minutes before he was screaming for his life.

¹ Nolland John, *The Gospel of Matthew: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 598.

This is surely the hub of the stories. We can't avoid life's storms. But trust in God and prayerful concentration can give us real calm. And these are attributes that we can cultivate. Back in the days of the sailing ships, many ships foundered on the sandbars off of Cape Cod. The northeasterly storm winds would blow the ships close to the shore, where they would wreck on the bars. With the shore in easy site, they would perish. The Coast Guard in that time developed ingenious rescue machinery and procedures to get the men safely off the ship. And they practiced them frequently. The Coast Guard knew that in the middle of the storm was not the best time to learn how to run the rescue equipment. There's the old story about the man who never patched the hole in his roof. When it was raining, he couldn't do it. When the weather was nice, it didn't need to be patched. The Coast Guard knew that on the nice days, when the ships were sailing easily around the Cape, it was important to practice. When the storm came, their skills would be ready.

Prayer, meditation and other spiritual practices are like that. They require practice. They require development even, really especially, when they may not seem necessary. Spiritual practices will make a positive difference even on the calm days. And they will be instrumental on the stormy days. Way back in the nineteenth century Alexander Bruce wrote a summary of the Gospels, and he called it *The Training of the Twelve*. There's truth to the idea that the story of Jesus is the story of training disciples. When Peter and the others found themselves in the storm, even though they still were scared to death, they had had some training. Peter says, "Master, if it's really you, call me to come to you on the water." Due to his training, Peter already knows about trusting Jesus. He is putting his training into action.

Another thing the stories can teach us is that even when we have found calm in the storm, our fear can come back in a moment. Until we're Jesus himself, we will, at our best, go in and out between faith and calm on the one hand and doubt and fear on the other. The word used here for doubt means being divided in two ways. Uncertain. What a great description for what Peter experienced. He had trust, and he didn't. He's like the man in Mark who says, "Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief." We've all been there, haven't we? Calm in the storm can be ephemeral. We can have it one minute and lose it in the next.

I love how The Message renders Jesus' response to the return of Peter's fear. He holds out his hand into assist the disciple, and then he says, "Faint-heart, what got into you?" It's almost as though Jesus is kidding Peter—hey bonehead, what happened?

In some sense that kind of familiarity and playfulness fits the situation. Here in rapid succession, Peter and the other disciples are howling in despair in the boat, Peter finds his trust, walks out of the boat and finds calm in the storm, then just as quickly Peter's trust turns to doubt, and finally Jesus reaches out his hand to help him. It's almost slapstick.

But there is forward movement even in these few humorous verses. At first Peter and the other disciples in the boat are so afraid that they even think Jesus is some kind of a ghost. Then Peter understands that it is Jesus. He finds his faith. Then he loses it. But when he falters the second time, it seems a little less cataclysmic. In the first they howl, "Oh God, it's a ghost, we're certainly done in." In the second Peter cries, "Lord, save me."

So, the bad news is that we'll never fully escape the storms of life. But the good news that as we develop our spiritual lives and our trust, the storms will gradually become less terrifying, even if we still feel some days as though we are sinking.

So, where have gotten? Well, first, I think that Herod and many others over the centuries sometimes get distracted by Jesus' miracle of walking on water. The story's more important theme is about the inevitability of the storms of life that will buffet us and the spiritual practices

that can help us. These are practices we can practice, and they will far better serve us if we do. Even so, we will continue to experience fear in the storms some of the time. Serenity and trust do not increase on a straight line, and they are not permanent. We'll lose grasp of trust sometimes. But our spiritual practices will generally incline us toward trust and away from fear. We may even get our fear managed to the point that Jesus can be playful with us. We may hear him say, "Hey faint heart, what got into you," even as he offers his hand to save us. I hope so. Let us pray. Holy God, may we experience your calming presence in the storms of our lives. For we know that you are there always to encourage us and to offer us your hand. Amen.