

“Seeing God in a Crisis”
Romans 10:5-15 Matthew 14:22-33

There is an old story that has made the rounds in various editions about the new Methodist preacher in town that was invited to go fishing by the town’s Baptist preacher and the town’s Pentecostal preacher. They went fishing in a nice lake that was just outside of town. The three of them were in a small boat enjoying the relaxing afternoon as they waited for a bite and had a pleasant conversation with each other. After a while the Baptist preacher said, “I’m thirsty, so I’ll go back to the truck to get us a drink.” Immediately, he got out of the little boat and walked right across the lake until he could hop up on to the shore, went up to his truck and got three sodas, then pretty as you please, walked back across the lake and got back in the boat. The Methodist pastor just sat there as the Baptist preacher handed him his soda, and the Pentecostal preacher didn’t say anything so neither did he.

After a little while the Pentecostal preacher said, “I’m a little hungry. I’ll go get us something to eat.” Whereupon, he also got out of the boat, walked across the lake until he could hop up on the shoreline, went to the truck, got three sandwiches out of the cooler, retraced his steps across the lake and got back in the boat. The Methodist preacher sat there munching on his sandwich, and neither of the other preachers acted any different at all.

Finally, after having mulled this over, the Methodist preacher did not want to be outdone. After all, if the Baptist preacher and the Pentecostal preacher could do this walking on water thing, he was not going to be outdone, even if he was new in town. So the Methodist preacher said, “I am all out of bait. I’m going to go get some fresh worms.” And he got out of the boat and immediately sank to the bottom and began flailing around until he managed to scramble to shore.

The Baptist preacher quietly smiled at the Pentecostal preacher and said, “We probably should have told him where the stumps are.”

The story about Jesus walking on the water is one of the most famous of the gospels. It is also told the Mark and John, but it is only here in Matthew that we also are told of Peter’s exchange with Jesus and his brief encounter with water walking, without the benefit of stumps.¹ Walking on water is a boldly symbolic, superhero kind of thing to do. It is a revelation of the divine nature of who Jesus is.

The gospels reveal that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. That is a unique equation that becomes very relevant in this gospel story. It seems at first, that Jesus can’t wait to get rid of the disciples and rushes them on to this boat so he can get away for some time in private. After all, that was his original intention before the crowds followed him and they ended up depending on him to perform

¹ Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21

a miracle that we call the feeding of the 5,000. So now Jesus manages some private time up the mountain, by himself, to pray. It seems that while he is enjoying his private devotions, his rush to be rid of the disciples has put them in the middle of a violent storm with waves relentlessly battering them.

I have no idea what it would be like to walk on water, but I am even less eager to experience what it is like to ride out a storm at sea. Some of you may have stories to tell. Before I listen to them I would like to take my Dramamine.

I read about a Pastor who was attending seminary in England. He had been on a holiday in the Netherlands but needed to make it back to school for their final exams. This was before the Chunnel whisked people by rail under the English Channel. The Hovercraft was grounded by a storm so their only option was a ferry. As they boarded the vessel they noticed that all the shutters on the ship were closed. They didn't know what that meant. They soon found out. Even seasoned seafarers were struggling with seasickness. During the crossing a number of times the prow of the ship dipped completely below the swell of the waves. Along with his companions he found a bench in relative dry to ride out the crossing. They tried very hard to maintain their composure. Their faces turned pale green. Their supper had departed before very long and their dignity abandoned them not long after. Describing that experience he says, "Fear is a word that comes to mind: fear of being out of control, not in control of either the ship or the waves, fear that death could be just a wave away."² He said that it was on that channel crossing that he truly learned how to pray.

The experience of a storm at sea just multiplies the terrified awe that the disciples experienced when they experienced Jesus walking to them on the water in the middle of the storm. And it also makes Peter's exchange with Jesus that much more incredible as well.

I have heard many sermons using as a text Jesus response to Peter, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" The exhortation that is usually used is that, if we allowed our faith to be focused on Jesus and not to become distracted by the waves then we would be able to walk on water, figuratively speaking, I believe. I do not want to dilute for a minute the importance to our faith of focusing on Jesus, but I am not convinced that walking on water is a desired spiritual objective for any of us.

I do believe that this gospel story has significance for our lives today, even though I doubt any of us expect to go walking on the Manatee River any time soon. Is this really a morality tale about our faith and the extremes to which we should be willing to go for Jesus? Or is there more to discover here?

When the early church heard this gospel this first place they went for understanding was to the boat itself. For the earliest disciples of Jesus the boat

² Dr Luke Bouman, Tree of Life Lutheran Church, Conroe, Texas

was a symbol for the community of faith, the church, which was the very body of Christ. They understood the boat as a place of safety in the midst of life's storms, and with the hostility they experienced we know their storms were severe. So, if the boat was the church, then why would Peter, the leader of the church abandon the boat. Well, we also know that from our very beginning it was not only on the sea that there were severe storms, there were also storms in the boat itself. Peter may have been the leader of the church but he was vulnerable and frail himself and not immune from temptations, perhaps not even the temptation to do spectacular things for the sake of being spectacular.

No, I don't think Peter is who we are supposed to be keeping our eyes on, except as a cautionary tale. When we turn our eyes back to Jesus, then I think we have a better chance of seeing what God is up to in this gospel. When Jesus approaches the disciples and they are terrified he says, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

All three of those statements are soaked with meaning. "Take heart" is what Moses said to the Israelites as they were pursued by Pharaoh's army to the edge of the Red Sea.³ "Do not be afraid" was what the angel said to Joseph at the very beginning of Matthew.⁴

When Jesus says, "It is I" in the Greek it is very obvious that Jesus is saying much more than just, "Hey guys, don't worry! It's only me." The Greek words here are "ego eimi" which is a very emphatic way of saying "IT IS I" These are the exact same words that God uses in the Old Testament when Moses encounters Yahweh in the burning bush and Moses asks God what is his name. God replies, "Ego Eimi."⁵ I can't help but think that this is what sets Peter off on his wild water adventure. Peter is basically saying something like this, "Jesus, if you really are "I AM" then give me a command that I could not possibly obey on my own and then I will know that you really are who you say you are."

So Peter is showing that he has really understood who Jesus is saying that he is, well almost understood because Peter wants to give a test of his own. Like a lot of us, Peter prefers to be the tester rather than the tested, and his testing question to Jesus sounds very similar to words of Satan as he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, "If you are the son of God ..."⁶ It only took Peter a few steps on the water to learn that the servant is not greater than the master. Peter was not finished learning this lesson of humility as we will see in the coming weeks.

This was not the first time Jesus saved Peter; it would not be the last. This time Jesus saved Peter by summoning divine power to keep him afloat, but later Jesus will save Peter, and not only Peter but Jesus will embody God's plan for

³ Exodus 14:13

⁴ Matthew 1:20

⁵ Exodus 3:14

⁶ Matthew 4:3, 6

the salvation of the entire creation by relinquishing divine power and emptying himself out of great love for all humankind. Jesus will surrender to being held under by coercion to the point of death. Through his death and resurrection Jesus will save not just Peter but all of creation. For disciples of Jesus Christ, this is the mystery of baptism, the paradoxical drowning that brings life.

In January 1982 Air Florida Flight 90 took off from Washington National Airport, clipped a bridge and plunged into the icy Potomac River. An essay was written in Time Magazine. It was titled "The Man in the Water."⁷ He expressed both a profound grief and gratitude as he described an unnamed passenger who had assisted with the rescue effort. "The Man in the Water" was described as a balding, probably in his 50's, with an extravagant mustache. He clung to the tail section of the airplane, and every time the police helicopter lowered a lifeline and flotation ring to him he passed it to another of the passengers in the icy waters. When the helicopter came back one more time, this man had gone under.

The Time reporter wrote, "Like every other person on that flight, he was desperate to live, which makes his final act so stunning. For at some moment in the water he must have realized that he would not live if he continued to hand over the rope and ring to others."

I want to suggest that we see Jesus as this man in the water, handing over the rope and ring to others, to everyone else who is desperate to live. The same man who walked on water and calmed the seas also found himself immersed in the deep with us and for our sake. Everytime the lifeline is lowered to him he places the flotation ring on a fellow passenger rather than saving himself.

Jesus hands over the lifeline to everyone who cries out, "Lord, save me!" and also to those who don't call his name. As Paul puts it "The Lord of all is generous to all and makes no distinction. With Jesus as the man in the water even nonbelievers are hoisted to safety from their murky depths. With one possible exception, there may be some among us who secretly harbor water walking ambitions. If so, I suggest you have a little talk with Peter.

But for the rest of us, who among us has not known what it is like, or even now, is not out on the stormy waves? In our moment of need, we cry out and a hand reaches down through the storm, the hand of Jesus clasps us. And in the security of that grasp we can know that neither the powerful temptations within us nor the chaotic forces that surround us can ever finally triumph, for the eternally steadfast love of God in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, and the encouraging and empowering Holy Spirit will never let us go. Amen.

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⁷ "The Man in the Water" in Time Magazine by Roger Rosenblatt. Monday, January 25, 1982.