

“Walk on Water”

Matthew 14: 22 – 33

Makemie Presbyterian Church

March 7, 2010; 3rd Sunday of Lent

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat & go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 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.

Early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 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, “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, & came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened & beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Jesus immediately reached out his hand & 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.”

This ends our reading.

What about this sermon that Jim has just read as our passage this morning? You might be a little surprised that I would call this a sermon, because this is a text of scripture & usually this is what is used to get a sermon. It is not a sermon itself. But yes, it is a sermon.

Matthew took an experience that the disciples had with Jesus – and, by the way, some ancient writers thought possibly it was a bad dream that Simon Peter had had that he had woke up screaming & saying, “It’s a ghost!” – but Matthew took this experience with Jesus and made it into a sermon.

An unusual sermon. Notice the way it starts: Jesus compelled his followers to get into the boat & go ahead of him to the other side. Why force the disciples into the boat? What’s the problem? Well, we

know the reason Jesus went to the other side of the sea was to have some time alone, but he hadn't been able to find any solitude, so maybe that was it. "Get out of my face," he may have been saying to the disciples, "I need some time with God."

Or maybe he sent them on ahead because there was danger. I think one reason Jesus so often withdrew in the Gospel of Matthew is that he was trying to avoid all those governmental threats against his life. After all, John the Baptist had just been killed & danger was around every corner.

Or it may be that Jesus wanted the disciples to get away because the crowd wanted to make Jesus king – at least the Gospel of John says they did. He had fed the multitude & they said, "Hey we have a breadwinner here. Let's make him king." And Jesus did not want his disciples influenced by all that. So he said, "Get into the boat and go to the other side," & they did. After sending the disciples off in the boat, Jesus went up onto the mountain to pray, which in Matthew is the first time it is said that Jesus went away to pray. This is a critical time.

So here is the scene: The disciples are in the boat trying to make their way across the sea back to the western shore & they're

not having any luck. They are pulling at the oars, but the wind is blowing against them & they move one yard forward & two yards back. They make no progress at all. The wind is up, stirring the waves & the water is coming into the boat. Some of the disciples are baling & some are pulling at the oars, but it evident that they're not going to make it. They are going to die here. It's a dark as midnight.

All through the night they pull at the oars. They bail the water. They cry & scream. They know they are going to die & they are thinking of their families, thinking of their children. *Did I tell my wife & children I love them? What did I not get done? I never expected to die here.* It's a terrible, terrible night.

Darkness exaggerates everything. A hundred yards in the daytime looks like ten miles at night. If somebody you love is a hundred miles away, when night comes it seems a thousand. Night just does things. I used to come from seeing a horror movie & I could have sworn the telephone poles were moving & that they were coming behind me & I could hear them walking faster & faster. But turn on the light & we see it's not that way.

“Mama there is someone at the window!” And Mama comes and turns on the light & it’s only the shrubbery rubbing against the screen. It’s okay. It’s dark.

Just before dawn, somewhere between three & six in the morning, Jesus comes to them. He comes to them on the sea.

When I would teach the senior highs this passage, much silliness would ensue, as I would try to get them to see the power of the symbolism & the message.

“Well it sure pays to know where the rocks are, doesn’t it?” they would say, “My sister has a boyfriend whom she thinks can walk on water. She thinks he can just walk on water, but I think he’s a dork personally.”

And here they go with all of this stuff. It was long enough ago that they would bring up the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* & sing that part about “Jesus, you can walk across my swimming pool.”

When the senior highs got through with all this cuteness, we went back to the point. And the point is this: *Only God can walk on the waves*. That is what the Bible says.

In Job, in Isaiah, in Habakkuk, in the Psalms, it is God who walks on the storm, God who makes a path in the sea. Why?

To show a miracle? To say, “Hey look, I’m walking on water”? No, don’t be shallow. In ancient times the sea was the place of evil. The evil monster was there, the Leviathan was there. The enemy of all that we know as good & right is there in the water. In the Bible, the water is the abode of all the forces that are against us. And God walks on the sea. In other words, there is no power, no storm, no wind, no force in the world that God cannot conquer, no evil over which God is not superior, nothing that can destroy your life because God loves & cares for you.

Jesus’ walking on the water is not to be understood as a miracle. Look at it, listen to it. Jesus comes in the storm on the sea & says, “Take heart, I am. These words are translated, “it is I” or “I am he,” but what Jesus actually says is, “I am.” “I am” – that’s the name for God. God has come to them in the storm in the person of Jesus, & what happens? They cannot believe it. At first they say, “It’s a ghost, it’s a ghost!”

From a distance Jesus does indeed seem like a ghost. I know a lot of people who have never made friends with Jesus & he is still out there as a ghost-like thing.

But Jesus gets closer & Simon Peter says to him, “If you are...if you are, tell me to come to you on the water.”

Do you recognize those words? Do you remember hearing those words before? When Jesus was tested in the wilderness, the devil said, “If you are the son of God...” The words of Simon Peter are the words of the tempter. I am putting you to the test, Jesus. If you are really the son of God...

It is no wonder that two chapters later Jesus says to Simon Peter, “Get behind me Satan.” So the fact that Simon Pete could walk on the water is just not a little thing. I’ve heard all those piddling little sermons that say that Peter tried to walk on the water but he took his eyes off Jesus & so he began to sink.

Do you understand what is really happening here?

Simon Peter doesn’t believe. He wants to put Jesus to the test & in the attempt to test Jesus, he ends up testing himself & sinking. You don’t test God.

Jesus gets in the boat & everything is all right. It was quiet & the others fell down in the bottom of that little boat & worshiped Jesus.

The sermon Matthew preaches is a sermon to the church. It is a sermon for all of the followers of Jesus in all our little boats in all of the storms, trying to make it alone. The disciples were not alone, but they were trying to make it alone – & they couldn't. That is a hard lesson to learn. The church is never, you are never, I am never exempt from the temptation to try to go it alone. A church with five members prays all the time, but a church with five thousand members is strong & who thinks they need to pray? When this church was in the freezing box down by the river, the prayers flew. And we still pray when we're in warm cozy air-conditioned comfort. We pray – we do – because we can't, just can't, make it alone.

A lot of people say to me, "Well those stories in the Bible, I don't know. I believed all that when I was a kid. I went to Sunday school & saw the pictures & all, but I'm not a kid anymore & I don't know. Ax heads floating, Joshua making the sun stand still, walking on water & stuff – I just don't believe that anymore." Why don't we all form a circle & get some garbage bags & put in them all the things we don't believe anymore. We'll fill up a lot of bags, but the critical moment will come when we have filled the bags & then we look at each other & say, "Now what is it we do believe? What do I believe?"

Of course I'm not a child anymore. I don't believe there are demons in the water. Nobody who jumps off the high dive into the water says, "Look out for the demons!" we don't believe it anymore.

Then where are the demons if they are not in the water? I know where they are. I know where the fears are. You don't believe in demons? Why the fear? You know what jealousy is, don't you? It is fear of the loss of love. Why are people greedy & just get as much as they can? It is a fear, a fear of insecurity.

Why do children cheat at school? A fear of failure.
Why does anybody tell a lie? A fear of punishment. Fear, fear, fear.
There are some people who stay on the telephone all the time to make sure everybody is still out there. What are you afraid of? A moment alone?

A blizzard strikes, the power is cut off & there goes the tv & the computer. Now what are we going to do? Have you thought of reading a book?

Last night my son led me out in the yard to see the sky, and, wow, it was absolutely beautiful. Television cannot do that.

You know we used to think about those things. We used to take little flat rocks & sail them on the water & hit the water. Sometimes

you could get it to skip five or six times if it was a good rock & you were strong. But I don't care how many times it skips, when it slows down – is that what you're afraid of? Do we work so hard at having a good time all the time because otherwise we get depressed? I don't believe there are demons in the water, I tell you folks, I wish they were in the water, but that's not where they are. That's not where they are at all.

I wish the demons would stay in the water. I don't know how to put it any clearer.

In the boat – & we're all in the boat – we can give pep talks to each other. “We'll make it. Some of you bail, we're going to make it.”

We can start whistling & singing. But the plain fact is that without trust in God, we aren't going to make the shore.

But if we trust in God, “we are more than conquerors through him who loves us..., and neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, not anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Amen? Amen.