

“The Kingdom Is Here”

Matthew 14:22-33

“To walk on water...

you’ve got to get out of the boat.”

A few weeks ago, the Weekly Bible Study was titled, “The Kingdom Is Coming” (June 6) . Today, we turn to a story demonstrating its arrival in Jesus Christ, whose authority and power, even over creation, are amply demonstrated. Just as importantly, this story, gives us a chance to talk about faith in light of the kingdom’s arrival.



A dark and stormy night

Perhaps the skies were darkening as the disciples climbed into the boat. Some were experienced fishermen and knew how quickly ferocious storms could form over the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps they even thought about the time not long before when they had awakened Jesus to save them from a storm (Matthew 8:23-27). He had, of course, saved them, calming the storm and chastising the disciples for their “little faith” (*oligopistos* in the Greek).

But, most likely, their minds were consumed with what they had just experienced. Just hours before, on a remote shore, Jesus had miraculously fed a huge throng. In front of their own eyes, he had taken five loaves of bread and two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, broken the bread . . . and fed thousands (Matthew 14:13-21). Then Jesus had quickly sent the disciples on ahead, instructing them to get into the boat and head out across the sea while he headed into the hills to be alone and to pray.

Jesus had never sent them ahead of him before. He had always been with them, there to protect and to lead. But now they were in the boat alone, heading across the sea in a growing storm, buffeted by stronger and stronger headwinds, the boat tortured by higher and higher waves. Shortly before dawn, the disciples looked out across the sea and saw a shocking and, indeed, terrifying sight – Jesus was walking toward them across the surface of the sea.

This story begs us to use our imaginations. Perhaps this is why so much of the Bible is stories. We can put ourselves in the story in a way that we could never engage an essay on doctrine. Who wouldn’t be a little anxious about climbing into the boat without Jesus? There is no indication that Jesus gave the disciples any instruction about what he wanted them to do when they reached the other side of the sea. Who wouldn’t be scared as the sea rose and the boat struggled? Who wouldn’t be terrified to look over the side of the boat and see someone, anyone, walking on the water? Who might not think it’s a ghost or at least a hallucination? Nobody can walk on water . . . or can they?

Would I respond as Peter did? That is the question. Would I get out of the boat? Peter did. He heard Jesus call out in the wind and identify himself. He heard Jesus tell them all to set aside their fear, to “take courage.” Peter yelled out that if Jesus called him, Peter would walk out to him. And when Jesus said, “Come,” Peter climbed over the side of the boat. When he got out there, for at least a few moments, Peter walked on the surface of the water himself. But then the wind

The Sea of Galilee

The sea referred to by Matthew is the Sea of Galilee, a harp-shaped body of water about 8 miles across at its widest part. The sea sits astride the great rift valley extending from Egypt upward into Syria. Therefore, the sea is 700 feet below sea level and is surrounded by high hills reaching about 1500 ft. The combination of the high hills and low sea causes abrupt temperature shifts and sudden, violent storms.

Jesus was raised in Galilee, a hilly region on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. Most of Jesus’ public ministry was spent in this area. The Sea of Galilee played an important role in Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus found his first disciples from among men who fished the sea’s waters. Further, Jews lived on the western side of the sea, while Gentiles lived on the eastern side. In today’s passage, Jesus is crossing the lake to minister among the Gentiles. Jesus’ work among Gentiles was always a potent demonstration that the kingdom of God was available to all.

The Bible can be a little confusing when it comes to names. The Sea of Galilee was also referred to as the Lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1), the Sea of Chinnerath (Num 34:11), and the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1). Lands and places would pick up assorted names as they passed through various hands and times. Maps in the back of your Bible can help, but even there most maps will not tell you all the names used through the course of biblical history.

hit his face. Perhaps he realized what he was doing. Regardless, he looked toward the storm and away from Jesus – and sank like a rock. Thrusting his hand upward, Peter cried out “Save me.” And Jesus did. But he also rebuked Peter for his “little faith,” *oligopiste*.¹ Pointedly, Jesus asked Peter, “Why did you doubt?”

A story for the church

It isn't difficult to see why Matthew tells us the story as he did. He is writing to a postresurrection church that can't see Jesus and touch Jesus as the disciples had years before. The disciples had climbed into the boat without Jesus beside them in the way he always had. They felt alone but they weren't. Jesus was still their Lord, coming to them in the most surprising way. Matthew's community might feel alone, but they weren't alone. Jesus would come to these Christians also, in the most surprising ways. And still today, Jesus comes to his people in the most surprising ways.

In response to Jesus' call, Peter climbs out of the boat and steps onto the water. He responds to Jesus in trust, in faith. But about as soon as he gets out, he takes his eyes off Jesus and sees the storm instead and sinks. Would it have been possible for Peter to have faith so strong that he could walk on water all the way to Jesus? I presume so; otherwise, why wouldn't Jesus tell him to stay in the boat? As Jesus reaches down to save Peter from drowning, he tells Peter that he is still—literally in the Greek—a “little faith” disciple, a believer who fails to trust God completely. Peter trusts Jesus, but only so far. Peter hasn't yet come to trust Jesus completely. Thus, as soon as Peter takes his eyes off Jesus and realizes where he really is, he sinks like a rock.

It is far too easy, too human, to see the storm and discover that our faith has fled us, replaced by doubts and fears. It isn't so much that the fears chase away our faith. Rather, our “little faith” is simply overwhelmed by events and anxieties.

But Jesus was there to save Peter and is here to save us, to grasp our outstretched hands and pull us to safety. Surely, Matthew wants us to see all this in his telling of the story.

Despite Peter's sinking, notice one thing in the story. Peter does walk on water. He doesn't climb over the side and slip between the waves. He gets out of the boat and, at least for a moment, walks on water! How that moment must have seemed to Peter. When he looked back on it, how did he feel? What thoughts ran through his brain? We can't know, but we can know this – if Peter had not gotten out of the boat, he could never have walked on water at all.

Translating “Belief” and “Faith”

Translations, even of the Bible, can be tricky. This is no truer than with the simple words: belief and faith. Jesus' Ch. 6 discourse in the Gospel of John has a few good examples. English translations use verb forms of the word “belief” to translate the Greek root, *pistis*. Jesus says, for example, “all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life” (v.40) and “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life” (v. 47). The Greek root here, *pistis*, means “faith,” but because English has lost the verb form of “faith,” we substitute “believe.” And this creates a problem.

For many English-speakers, the word “believe” speaks mainly of the intellect; it is a “head” word. Thus, it becomes easy to see “doubt” as the opposite of “belief” and make the whole thing about whether we agree with the basic doctrine/beliefs about Jesus, as we do when we affirm our beliefs when reciting the Apostle's Creed.

But this is not what the NT writers were getting at most of the time when they used *pistis* in a variety of grammatical forms. *Pistis*/faith is a “heart” word; “trust” is an excellent synonym. If I have faith in someone, it means I trust them. If we have faith in Jesus, we trust him in all things and with every part of our being – or at least we do the best job of trusting him as we can. Peter sinks because he does not really trust Jesus fully, probably because he hasn't yet grasped that Jesus is not only the Messiah, but God.

If we still had a verb form of “faith,” the two statements above would read thusly: “all who see the Son and faith in him [put their trust in him] may have eternal life” and “Very truly I tell you, whoever faiths [trusts] has eternal life.” Do I trust Jesus? Do I trust that what he says is true? Do I trust that he loves me and gave his life for me? Will I entrust to him all the messiness and mistakes of my life? These are the sorts of questions to ask ourselves when we ask ourselves if we truly believe in Jesus.

¹ Matthew would use this word, *oligopiste*, again in the final passage before Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Matthew only uses the word to describe the weak faith of believers, never unbelievers.

A “little faith” or a “lot of faith”

When Jesus sent the disciples on alone, he knew that he would not always be with them as he was then. He would be with them always, but in another way, a different way. They would no longer be able to rely on their five senses for their faith in Jesus. They would have to learn that faith is about being certain of what we can't see (Hebrews 11:1). They would have to grow in ways that they couldn't even imagine at the time.

When Peter stepped out of the boat, he relied on his trust, his faith, in Jesus. It was only by trusting Jesus that he was able to walk on water at all, if only for a few moments. Sadly, like too many of us, Peter quickly found that he was still a “little faith” disciple. Not surprisingly, such faith ill equips us for the troubles of this world, where we find our own faith tested again and again.

The truth is that part of being faithful will look to us like risk-taking, just as Peter took what seemed to be a risk by stepping out of the boat. Indeed, we live in a world that makes it seem easy, without risk, to be a Christian – but that is an appealing lie. Being a Christian is risk free only so long as we don't take it too seriously, don't let our faith truly shape our priorities and agendas. Once we step forward to admit and to proclaim that Jesus is Lord of all creation, much less our own lives, we embark on a journey that is all about trusting Jesus Christ completely, even when it leads us to a place that looks a lot less safe . . . like the open water.

The Purpose of Matthew's Gospel

Everyone who writes anything does so with a purpose. It might be to inform or to persuade. It might be to get a good grade or create a record of what happened. Every writer brings not only a purpose, but a point of view. This was no less true of the Gospel writers than it is any other author. Scripture is, to use Paul's phrase, “God-breathed,” but it is also the work of human authors. Thus, an important question is, “What can we know about Matthew's purpose in writing?”

Matthew was Jewish and he wrote for a Jewish audience, which explains the lengthy Jewish genealogy that opens his Gospel. Matthew wrote his gospel late in his own life, as long as forty or more years after Jesus' death and resurrection in 30AD. Matthew had Mark's Gospel to work from, in addition to his own recollections and other sources. At times, Matthew copied Mark word-for-word, but at other times modified Mark's account, as in today's story. Why include Peter stepping out of the boat when Mark does not?

It seems virtually certain that Matthew wrote for a community of Jewish-Christians. He went so far as to avoid the phrase, ‘kingdom of God,’ for fear that the word “God” might offend those Jews who would not utter God's name in any form. Instead, Matthew uses “kingdom of heaven.” He painstakingly portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecies and expectations.

When we read a story like today's, we can be comforted knowing that it was written to bolster the faith of Christians who struggled with doubts and fears just like our own. Matthew tells the story in this way so that his community would be strengthened in their faith, so that they would understand who it is they worshipped. Matthew wanted them to take risks, to step out of the boat, and to be “lot of faith” disciples.