

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Ebenezer Lutheran Church, Columbia, S.C.
August 10, 2008
Matthew 14:22-33

St. Augustine once said of Holy Scripture that while it contains pools at which lambs may drink, it also contains depths so deep that even elephants must swim.

In this Gospel lesson today we're in some of those deep waters. The scene itself is watery: the Sea of Galilee. It's a stormy night; the disciples' boat was being "tortured" by the waves, to read the Greek text literally. We've got the disciples thinking they see a ghost; we've got Jesus walking on the water; we've got Peter taking an involuntary swim.

As 21st century people we immediately focus on the apparent suspension of the laws of gravity in the account of Jesus walking on the water. Does God work miracles by intervening and suspending the physical laws that hold our universe together? I checked the internet for "Sea of Galilee, Walking on Water," and had some fascinating results. Two years ago an oceanographer at Florida State University published a paper in which he argued that there is evidence for a period of global cooling in the Mediterranean region 1500 to 2500 years ago—that would range from 1400 B.C. to A.D. 600—with temperatures averaging ten degrees less than they do today, and that, combined with conditions that obtain in the Sea of Galilee, could account for patches of floating ice in the Sea that might last for a couple of days. He suggested it was on one of these that Jesus walked. Immediately the news media jumped on this, and there was a flurry of articles and TV segments entitled, "Did Jesus Walk on Ice?" However, there quickly appeared another paper, co-authored by four paleolimnologists, people who study such things, who refuted the theory. I also found a story of a pastor in Libreville, Gabon, West Africa, who told his congregation that he had had a divine revelation that he would be able to walk on water across the estuary on which the city was built. The congregation gathered on shore. They watched him enter the water and walk on, more of his body immersed with every step, until his head was under water—and they never saw him again.

This, I suggest, is not the reaction that the original readers or hearers of Matthew's Gospel would have had. Remember that the evangelists, writing two generations or more after the death and resurrection of Jesus, were not dispassionate biographers. They wanted to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that it created faith, that it told who Jesus was and how he fit into God's work of redemption, and how Jesus met their needs as Christians in their own situations.

So the question is, how would Matthew's readers or hearers—for the Gospel would be read aloud to unlettered people—how would they react to this story?

Let's look at the story. It's just after the feeding of the multitude. Late in the day, dismissing the fed crowd, Jesus sends the disciples off in the boat to go to the other side

of the lake; he remains behind to pray. Never forget that Jesus himself needed to pray. If he needed to pray, how much more do we need to pray?

The disciples, however, run into stormy going. There are fishermen among them, well accustomed to the waters of the Sea of Galilee, but still they can make no headway against the wind. They are battered and weary when, early in the morning, when first light would be appearing on the horizon, they see a shadowy figure approaching over the water.

Who did people in the ancient world believe walked on water? In Greek and Roman mythology there were stories of demi-gods, divine heroes fathered by one of the gods but born of human mothers, who were able to walk on water: figures such as Hercules. In Jewish thought, however, it was believed that there was only one who could so overcome the chaos of the sea to walk on water. That was the one who, at the beginning, had turned the chaos of the primeval deep into the cosmos of the created order: God. It is God who “trampled the waves of the sea” as Job says; the writer of Psalm 75 declares of God: “Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.”

But the disciples don't believe divine aid is at hand. They're terrified. They cry out in fear, “It's a ghost!”

Yes, people in that day believed in ghosts. Shadowy figures who could be seen only in very dim light such as here, the first light of daybreak. But on water? In the ancient world it was believed that water created a barrier that ghosts could not cross. The story is saying that the disciples are willing to believe the impossible before they believed that divine help could be coming in the form of Jesus.

Jesus identifies himself: “Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid.” In Greek, the two words translated here “It is I”, *ego eimi*, also mean “I am.” Remember back in Exodus 3 in the story of the burning bush when Moses asks of God, “What is your name?” God replies, “I AM WHO I AM. . . . Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you”? This story is saying, it is through Jesus that the power and presence of God are mediated to the disciples.

For Matthew, the disciples in the boat represent the church. A church battered by storm—by troubles, by internal dissent, by persecution, by uncertainty of what its mission is. Jesus comes to help—but they don't recognize him, they don't believe it is he.

Peter certainly isn't sure. Look what he says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” “If it is you.” He's putting Jesus to the test. Prove to me that you are Jesus. Earlier in the Gospel there's another story where Jesus is put to the test. In the wilderness the devil says, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter, as he rebuked Satan in the earlier story. He simply says, "Come." He's going to let Peter find out for himself. So Peter climbs out of the boat and takes his first steps, and all goes well. But then, it says, "he noticed the strong wind." That's strange; he just noticed it? The wind had been blowing all the time. But now the wind and the waves push aside his concentration on the welcoming figure of Jesus. He fears he can't handle the wind and the waves; he forgets that Jesus can. And he sinks. But as he sinks, he cries out, "Lord, save me!" It's the cry of the Psalmist in Psalm 69: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck!" Or the psalmist of Psalm 144: "Stretch out your hand from on high; set me free and rescue me from the mighty waters."

And Jesus did exactly that: he reached out his hand and caught him. This is how Peter finds out that it is Jesus. Not by what he, Peter, can do, but by what Jesus does for him. And Jesus says to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

"You of little faith." In Greek it is one word: *oligopiste*. In Matthew, it's a word that Jesus uses of the disciples four times; it occurs only once more in the rest of the New Testament, in a parallel passage in Luke. It's always used of the disciples; never of the crowds; never of Jesus' opponents. His disciples are those of little faith.

"Why did you doubt?" The Greek word doesn't have anything to do with intellectual doubt, skepticism. It can mean "to hesitate." That's what Peter did in the story. Instead of marching straight on to Jesus he hesitated, took his eyes off Jesus, let the wind and the waves dominate his consciousness, and let them overcome him.

It's a good description of us, too: *oligopistoi*, "you all of little faith." Hesitating, vacillating between being overwhelmed by the troubles of this world—illness, economic woes, family problems, the disorder and violence of the world, the weight of our own mortality—or, on the other hand, trusting in faith that in every situation God's grace is sufficient for us. Trusting that in the midst of stormy waters, Jesus comes to be with us. Faith is not primarily a matter of the intellect; it is, rather, the way we live life, trusting in the faithfulness of God to be with us, even in the storm-tossed seas of life.

Back in the boat, with Jesus present, the wind ceased. With no wind, their sail was of no use; the disciples had to get out their oars and row. Even with Jesus in the boat, they weren't magically transported to the far shore they were headed for. They still had to do the hard work to get there. But with Jesus present, the fear was gone.

And back in the boat the disciples acknowledge Jesus for who he is; "Truly, you are the Son of God." You are the one who makes God present to us. In you, God is with us." This, of course, is Matthew's message throughout the entire Gospel. At the beginning, in the story of Jesus' birth, he is called Immanuel, "God with us." At the very end of the Gospel the risen Jesus sends his disciples out to the world with the promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

We have to be careful what lesson we take from this story. The lesson from Peter's wet excursion is not, "if he had had enough faith he could have walked all the way on water." He shouldn't have put Jesus to the test. If he had enough faith, he would have stayed in the boat, and all would have been well. So the lesson is not, "If we have enough faith we can overcome our problems in spectacular ways." That pastor in Gabon certainly had great faith, but he still couldn't walk on water. A few years before we left India, the daughter of a prominent evangelist was killed in an automobile accident. Usually in India, in a hot climate without embalming, burial follows death as soon as possible: on the same day or the day following. But for three days the evangelist and his family prayed over the body of his daughter, sure that if their faith were sufficient, God would raise her from the dead. God didn't.

We all, in the church, are in that boat with the disciples. That's Matthew's message. The waters of chaos buffet us, too. We're not spared the difficulties and the trials of life: accident, illness, financial reverses, damage from storm and flood, the loss of those nearest and dearest to us, aging, maybe even the slow slide into the forgetting of Alzheimer's, with the strain that will be for caregivers. Beyond our personal lives, the world's a mess: terror, violence; a sagging economy, brought about in large part by greed; a threatened planet. Think of that planet as you try to watch the Olympics through the smog of Beijing. What sort of a world are we leaving for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren? We need to get out our oars and do some hard rowing to get our little boat, our fragile planet, safely on course.

So what is the message that Matthew would give us through this story? Surely it is that even when caught in the chaos of the raging seas of life, Jesus is with his church, his disciples, helping them to overcome, giving them grace sufficient for each day, even if they are, as he calls them, those of little faith.

O Lord, we believe; help our unbelief.