

Year A  
Proper 14  
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28  
Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b  
Romans 10:5-15  
Matthew 14:22-33  
August 9, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Last Sunday we had one of the big miracle stories as our Gospel reading—the feeding of the five thousand—and today we have another one—Jesus walking on the water. And somehow this is more dramatic—it’s certainly more cinematic. Even though both of these miracles suspend the laws of nature, this one is more dramatic, because it takes place during a storm, the disciples are afraid, and it deals with WATER, which always has great significance in the Bible.

In fact, for the early listeners of Matthew’s story, the fact that Jesus had control over both the water in the lake and could walk on it, and the water in the storm, would have immediately meant that he was divine. Because in scripture, God is the only being who has control over water. Can anyone think of Bible stories that have water as a central element? [People called out “Moses and the Red Sea,” “The Flood,” and “Turning Water into Wine.”] The creation story is one, remember? God creates heaven and earth, and water covers everything, and “The wind of God swept over the face of the waters.” (Gn 1:2) “So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.” (Gn 1:7) Then God puts the water on the earth into seas and lakes so that dry land appears—God has complete control over all of this.

Another incidence of God’s sovereignty over water is, of course, the flood. God causes rain for 40 days and 40 nights, and a flood covers the entire earth, because of human sinfulness. When the flood waters recede, God makes a covenant with Noah and his family (Gn 9:11): “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” Only God has the authority to do this.

And remember the parting of the Red Sea for the Hebrews to flee from Pharaoh’s army: (Ex 14:21) “Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.” And again with the parting of the River Jordan so that God’s people could enter into the promised land: (Josh 3:14-17) “the feet of the priests bearing the ark [of the covenant] were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing towards the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.”

Those of you who participated in our recent Job Bible study might remember that one of the things that Job says God did was “trampled the waves of the Sea.” (Job 9:8), and “walk[s] in the recesses of the deep” (Job 38:16). So when the disciples see Jesus walking on the water, this is terrifying to them, because he is doing something that only God does. And the early hearers of this story would have had a similar, awestruck response to hearing about this miracle.

Control over the water would be enough, but this is not the only indication Matthew gives us that Jesus is divine. Remember Jesus says “Take heart, It is I. Do not be afraid.” In English it doesn’t sound particularly amazing, but in the Greek Matthew has him saying “*ego eimi*” which translates as I AM—the same thing that God says to Moses from the burning bush: I AM that I AM (Ex 3:14). So here Jesus identifies himself exactly with God the creator, and God the liberator, trampling the waves as he approaches the disciples to save them.

After Jesus identifies himself, Peter can’t really believe it, which is understandable, in some ways. Even though the disciples have seen Jesus perform miracles, I imagine they didn’t really think of him in divine terms. So Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Notice Peter calls him “Lord,” not rabbi, which means “teacher.” Peter gives him his *real* title. And so Jesus tells him to come to him. And Peter does! Peter is able to do this miraculous thing, as long as he is looking at Jesus, but then “when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” Peter loses his focus, and realizes how incredible the thing he is doing really is, sees the danger of the storm, and becomes afraid. How often that can happen to us! Jesus calls us to do something, perhaps outside of our comfort zone, maybe even that we think is outside of our abilities, and we are too afraid to do it.

What does that look like for you? Certainly right now we are having stormy seas and troubled waters in our world. Right now there are so many things that we’re being asked to do that are a struggle: quarantine at home, and stay away from our family and friends; wear a mask when we go out in public; sanitize and wash our hands constantly; go through amazing screening just to be allowed to have a doctor’s appointment, or even have that appointment online, rather than in person. And people are still getting sick and still dying. People are losing jobs and businesses. All over the country there is political and social unrest. This is our storm right now, and we haven’t had one like this in the US in decades. But do we hear Jesus over the storm? Do you hear him calling to you?

Peter cries out to Jesus as he’s sinking, and Jesus catches him saying, “you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Little faith—I don’t see that as an insult. Remember Jesus says that if you even have a little faith—faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move mountains. He knows Peter has only a little faith, but it was enough to get him out of the boat, and to take a few steps on the surface of the water. Even a little faith brought about that miracle. So a little faith is not a bad thing. Most of us are like this: a combination of faith and fear, belief and unbelief.

And so they get into the boat, and notice the wind stops immediately. “And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” They get it. This Jesus whom they’ve been following is the Son of God. He is Divine. He is the I AM. This is the first time in Matthew’s gospel that they say this.

In the week to come, I invite you to think about Peter’s literal stepping out in faith. Put yourself into his place in the story. Hear the wind, feel the waves, the rocking of the boat. Step onto the surface of the water with Jesus. And then think of what Jesus is calling you to do with a “little faith.” Where is he asking you to step out in faith during this stormy time?

Amen

Melanie K. Lewis