

Sermon: August 13, 2017 – Matthew 14: 22-33
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore, AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Jesus, walking on the water.

Responses to this story basically define the varied relationship between Canadians and Christianity in 2017:

- Huddled together, in a smallish group, are the folks for whom the story is and must be literally true as presented, because everything in the Bible is literally true as presented.
- Wandering freely is a much larger number of people, who look at this story as a prime example of why they don't and won't and never will trust a word they hear from Christians, because the story is obviously a make-believe story, trusted by those who place the great struggles of life in the hands of an imaginary friend.
- Another smallish group, but growing daily, are those who have other ways of relating to the Divine, who hear this story as part of Christianity's God-narrative and take it as sacred story; not *their* story, but a story worthy of respect.
- There's a widely varied group of undetermined size, probably including most of us gathered here this morning, who wonder what this curious, familiar story has to say to us today, what metaphors it inhabits and what challenges it presents.
- And, sorry to say, perhaps the biggest group didn't hear the story at all.. or heard it, shrugged, and went back to their job, or their leisure activity, or their smartphones.

Within each of these groups are quiet folks and boisterous folks, happy folks and angry folks, engaged folks and distracted folks. Some of these groups are more cohesive than others. Some like it when the sailing is smooth and ice tea is being shared by all, while others don't feel fully alive until the seas are choppy and there's a struggle to be faced. For some, this story is a poster that goes up on the wall because it is so descriptive of their lives and their Lord, and for others, this story could well be developed into a logo or a meme used to mock the foolishness of anyone who believes in a supernatural realm. One way or another, it's a story worth exploring.

We begin that exploration, by seeing that this story is actually part three of a three-part story. This larger narrative begins with Jesus receiving the chilling news that his kinsman, John the Baptist, had been put to death, and in response to this news Jesus needs to get away to pray and mourn and process it all. But he doesn't get that alone time, because part two of the story is the gathering of a crowd who come to him for healing, a scene which culminates in the feeding of the multitude. Determined to finally get that alone time, Jesus loads his disciples into a boat to go back across the lake, while he ascends a mountain to pray, and it is at this point that we pick up the story, of a storm, and an out-of-the-boat encounter between Jesus and Peter. In this larger story, we have a meeting of miraculous elements – the feeding of more than 5,000 with two fish and five barley loaves, and the walking on water – and horrifying political undertones, of John the Baptist being murdered because of his challenging words of change. Or to put it another way, in the face of very real, frightening possibilities, we have a God story that will not be held to the usual limits: the group gathered for healing won't be sent away to find their own meals and Peter won't be plunked back into the boat, though in both cases these would be the sensible solutions. Jesus, and those closest to him, would have been deeply aware of the threat to their ministry and their lives now that John had been executed, and in that context we have these tales of a God who refuses to be ruled by scarcity or fear.

Focusing again on today's gospel, of walking on water in stormy seas: that promise of holy presence in the midst of turbulence has been and continues to be such an important message, particularly for people in the most dire of circumstances. Although the story is told from the standpoint of a narrator who can see the whole scene unfold, we are also implicitly invited to picture ourselves in that boat, "a long way from the shore...going against the wind...being tossed around by the waves." (Matt. 14: 24) They believe that they see a person walking on the water, and they scream out in fear, unsure whether they should be more frightened of the crashing waves or this ghost coming toward them. One way or another, the seas are choppy, and something's gotta give and, as usual, it is that impulsive, bold, brave disciple named Peter who puts a voice to it.

Here's how it unfolds, in the words of the Contemporary English Version: (vv. 27-31)

"At once, Jesus said to them, "Don't worry! I am Jesus. Don't be afraid."

Peter replied, "Lord, if it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come on!" Jesus said. Peter then got out of the boat and started walking on the water toward him. But when Peter saw how strong the wind was, he was afraid and started sinking. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

Right away, Jesus reached out his hand. He helped Peter up and said, “You surely don’t have much faith. Why do you doubt?”

And then the denouement (vv. 32-33):

When Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the wind died down. The men in the boat worshiped Jesus and said, “You really are the Son of God!”

Notice here, who initiates the action. Peter, not Jesus, puts forward the idea of stepping out of the boat; and Jesus, far from saying, “oh Peter, that’s ridiculous” says, “Come on! Go for it!” Setting aside the physics of a human being standing on water, we have in this interchange a really important model for our interaction with Christ. When things are at their worst, our little boat far from shore and being battered by the waves, we see Jesus, and need to seek from him the encouragement to get out of the boat and do something beyond our usual capacity. At some level, we know that it’s easy to drift into self-limiting behaviours, to settle for “can’t” when “why not?” is a possibility. Years ago I saw a little plaque (with quote attributed to Henry Ford) that said, “Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re right,” and I have seen the truth of that time and again, in my life and in the lives of others. Sometimes, the thing I need the most is the encouragement to get the heck out of the boat and start taking steps that I would normally consider impossible; and what makes them possible, is knowing that there is someone already out there who is cheering me on.

Thinking back to the start of this sermon, and the various responses to the story of Jesus (and, briefly, Peter) walking on the water, I can just about hear the eyes rolling in those who already think the whole concept of faith is nonsense. And to an extent, I get it: it can sound really trite when we hear someone say, “when I needed to be saved from the storm, I knew Jesus was there, reaching out to me.” It sounds trite because it seems to give away responsibility, and it may well sound completely and hurtfully untrue to those who have prayed for God’s help in times of terror, and have heard only silence, or what seemed like silence. It sounds a bit like treating Jesus as a life preserver, rather than learning how to swim.

But then we hear from Jan Richardson, a pastor, author and artist in Florida whose words of life and faith have meant so much to our worship life here at Ralph Connor. In early December, 2013, Jan’s husband, Garrison ‘Gary’ Doles died suddenly and unexpectedly at age 62, while being prepared for a medical procedure. It was a heartbreaking loss for Jan, of a life companion with whom she shared spirit and art and love, and it took a lot of working through. Then, in August of 2014, Jan wrote this:

“Eight months have passed since Gary’s death: a moment, an aching eternity. I can tell you that I know what it means to be borne up when the waters overwhelm. I know the grace of hands that reach out to carry and console and give courage. I am learning—again, anew—what faith is, how this word that we sometimes toss around so casually holds depths within depths that will draw us beyond nearly everything we once believed.

“This is some of what I know right now about faith:

“That faith is not something I can summon by a sheer act of will.

“That it lives and breathes in the community that encompasses us.

“That I cannot force faith but can ask for it, can pray that it will make its way to me and bear me up over the next wave, and the next.

“That it comes. That I can lean into it. That it will propel me not only toward the Christ who calls me, but also back toward the boat that holds my life, incomprehensible in both its pain and its grace.”

When I hear those words – or perhaps “hear” isn’t the right word, because they press in on my heart and my soul and my gut more than speaking to my ears – I release all possibility that those who experience the healing reach of Jesus in times of trial or sorrow are misguided. Jan’s words are to be trusted, and they, in turn, propel me to recall times in my life when I have been restored to life and health and safety by the one who lived and died and lives again, and by communities of people who trust in him.

At this moment, there are millions of people, perhaps billions, who would describe their life circumstances as “turbulent” or “stormy,” and they stand in the tradition of oppressed people over the ages who have needed evidence of hope. It might be deeply personal – internal voices of anxiety or self-loathing, struggles with depression or loss; it might be the turbulence of living with an addict, and that constantly-unsettled existence that forbids feeling or speaking; it might be the turbulence of living in a war zone, or needing to escape the dangers of religious or sexual persecution; or it might be great big storm cloud hanging over all of us, the constant culture of unsettled-ness that is gripping our world at this moment. For many, many people, the boat is far from shore, the

seas are choppy, and the captain seems to have abandoned ship, and in those circumstances they need to know that they can trust God to accompany them, to guide them, to comfort them, to embolden them. And if that happens to describe your situation today, know that it's not just "someone else" who is within God's loving care, as seen in the words and actions and ongoing presence of Jesus Christ; that care is for you, as well.

This past month, as I've been on holidays, it has been a joy to hear Shannon preach three Sundays, as she serves the United Church up at Innisfail. On those three Sundays, and the two Sundays I worshipped elsewhere, there has been a common thread to the preaching: a reminder that our relationship with God is not to be characterized by us, here, and God, way out there; our relationship with God is here, now, together, as people of faith and as a gathered congregation. We are, in a very real sense, the body of Christ in the world; when someone needs a friend, an advocate, a champion, it is often up to us to reach across the waves as Christ and say, "come on! It's going to be fine." Thinking back to the story in Matthew, when Peter started to sink, it wasn't because he was trying to do the impossible; it was because he was overwhelmed by fear of the waves – he was worried that the external circumstances were too big for him. An important role for us, then, if we are the ones doing the work of Jesus in this scenario, is to help people understand that their strength, their resilience, their resolve will be enough, especially if they know they can count on us to be the presence of Christ with them.

When I examine my own life, the truly precarious times when I didn't know how I would get through, the hand of Christ reaching out to me has taken many different forms. It has been the patient listening of a teacher. It has been the love of spouse and children. It has been Jesus, whose receptiveness to my prayers has helped me figure out so much. It has been the power of Christian community, reaching out in kindness and prayer. It has been an internal voice, reminding me that I am a child of God. Each time in a different form, but each time, Christ, present. No, it hasn't always come immediately; no, it hasn't always been what I wanted to hear or where I wanted to go; and no, I don't think it's simple. But I do assert that we, as a community of faith and me, as one who has made promises to you and to God and to the Church, have a responsibility to keep reaching out as Christ to those in distress, to keep reaching to Christ out in our distress, to keep encouraging faith in the midst of doubt. Sometimes we will do that together, "in the boat" as it were, and sometimes we'll be called to take those scary steps out of the boat, expanding our circle of care, challenging ourselves with the realities of people whose lives are presently unknown to us.

I don't know about you, but I am more a "smooth sailing" guy than a "bring on the turbulence" guy. Yet I know, that we cannot live, truly live, without facing our own turbulence and engaging the rolling, chopping waves of the life of another. We serve no one by seeking safety and sameness by ignoring the storms. And so I give the last words of this sermon to Jan Richardson, who closed her reflection on walking across water with these words of benediction, a prayer for courage for the Church:

"That we will risk the drenching,
by which we are drawn toward the voice that calls us,
the love that catches us,
the faith that carries us
beyond the wind, [beyond] the wave."

Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, may this be so. Amen.

References cited:

Richardson, Jan. <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/08/05/walk-across-that-water/#.U-Jlq1zvbnc> and <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2013/12/10/beloved-a-blessing-for-garrison-doles/>