

August 9, 2020 Sermon by Randy Smith

Matthew 14:22-33

Pentecost 10-A-2020

“Our Small Boat and the Wide Sea”

The *first* thing you should know about this morning's sermon is that you're **darned lucky** to hear it.

I say that because this is a sermon on a Gospel story that is **complicated**, so complicated that almost all of the sources and commentators I rely on each week to help me preach -- well, they basically just leave this text alone. One of my favorites began his comments by saying, "Matthew 14:22-33 is, for me, one *tough* text." And what others of them *did* go on to suggest what to say about this text -- well, frankly, much of it was not only *kind of a stretch* but it was *also* **contradictory**.

So, just not much help there.

*One* of the **major complications** with this story, of course, is that we're dealing with the report of a **miraculous** event, namely, someone *walking on water*. And not sinking. *Defying* the known laws of physics. It's hard to get much more miraculous than that.

Now, over especially the last several centuries, folks have insisted that the miracle stories in the Gospels present an **intellectual problem** in need of being *solved*, and they have come up with all kinds of ways to try to do this. One of the most **radical** solutions was undertaken by no less a figure than America's own Thomas Jefferson. He simply excised these stories from a version of the Gospels he published in 1820, entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Being a man of **science**, Jefferson saw the miracle stories as "**artifacts**" of a *primitive* intellectual past, *relics* which should now -- in the early "**modern**" era -- be dispensed with, *not only* because they were an intellectual *embarrassment* in the present era, but *also* because they stood in the way of people *accessing* and *absorbing* all of the **valuable moral teaching** of Jesus available in the Gospel materials.

The problem with Jefferson's solution is that Jesus' miracles are **part and parcel** of the work he has been sent to do -- namely to **challenge** us to **change our minds** about how we *see*, and so **understand**, and so are **able to live** in the world around us. You'll recall Matthew's one-sentence summary of Jesus' original preaching (4:17): "**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven has come near". That imperative, translated from the Greek as "repent" (**metanoiete**) means, literally, to "change your mind!" So, the Gospel writers -- who *understood* this -- **retained** the

miracle stories about Jesus when they compiled their work, even though they undoubtedly faced **skeptics** in their own time as well.

But we "modern" people keep on **missing out on** the *challenge*, and the *invitation to change* our minds, involved in Jesus' miracles, because we insist on trying to understand the world we are part of in purely in terms of **cause and effect**. We have chosen to believe the story that all that really matters is what can be seen, measured, analyzed and replicated or, i.e., that the **creation** we are a part of is *not* a creation, but rather some sort of complex *mechanism* which we can come to understand and finally manipulate to our own ends. It's a story that leads us to a view of the world which has been described by some as "*diminished*", "*reduced*" or "*flattened*".

What do I mean here? Cf. my Religion course in early 19th-c. European philosophy at Duke, and my paper about the loss in that era of the concept of the world as a **3-story "house"**, with an upper floor and a basement, *viz.*, some reality "above" and "beneath" our everyday lives. The professor -- persuaded that one story was all the "house" really had -- was, however, unimpressed. I think she thought I was missing the point of what she was teaching, and so gave me only a "C".

If the world we are a part of *is* some sort of complex mechanism which we, with our ongoing investigation of it, can finally figure out and -- most importantly -- *control*, then **who needs a Creator?** And our achieving this, you have to understand, is what will --incrementally at least -- help us in solving maybe the biggest problem all of us face during every waking hour (and in a great many sleeping hours as well), namely **fear**.

Notice that in the story this morning, it's *not* the case that Peter -- having left the boat -- suddenly **begins to sink** and *then* panics. No, it's the other way around: **panicking**, he *then* begins to *sink* into the water, and cries out to Jesus for help. He begins well, with his eyes on Jesus, responding to Jesus' invitation to "Come". But then his **common sense** kicks in: everybody *knows* people cannot walk on water, and if they *try* they risk **drowning!** And *this* in turn leads to what follows.

Common sense is *usually* what **disables** our discipleship to Jesus. *Not* that Jesus is about enabling his followers to defy the laws of gravity (and, by the way, buoyancy). But he *is* about enabling us to lead lives of obedience which will take us **beyond common sense, beyond conventional thinking** and *wisdom* in life, in making a **witness** to the world around us as to *who* Jesus is, and *what* the kingdom of God is.

One of the big questions we face in life, then, is *how* we are going to deal with the **problem of fear** -- our moment-by-moment vulnerability to all sorts of harm and loss, ultimately of life itself. One way to try to deal with it is by way of **knowledge and control**. The Bible, on the other hand, commends **faith**.

Ah, but faith of **what kind**? This is a *second major complication* in the story. Does faith, i.e., involve *leaving* the boat? Or staying put *inside* of it?

The "**standard**" sermon on this text -- which I suspect most of you are well acquainted with -- *focuses* on **Peter**, and his leaving the boat, and then faltering, almost fatally, in his efforts to walk on water. The **usual message** is, *one*, "If Peter had had **enough faith**, he could have done it," and, *two*, "If only **we** had **enough faith**, **we** could do *similarly extraordinary* things" in life. But, as most of us are surely willing to concede, we just don't do much in the way of *extraordinary* things. *Most* of us are happy, I think, if we can achieve the *ordinary*, everyday things in life. So, the sermon leaves us feeling **guilty**, and **deficient**, like we are those whose faith is -- apparently -- *never* going to be "enough".

**Isn't it strange**, though that, Peter alone among the disciples, when he hears Jesus saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid", insists on putting Jesus to a **test**? Listen: "Lord, **if it is you**, command me to come to you on the water." Where have we heard that kind of question put to Jesus before? That's right -- in the Temptation story, posed by the devil, who keeps asking Jesus, "**If you are the Son of God..**," then do something *extraordinary*. To which Jesus famously replies, of course, "Again it is written, 'Do **not** put the Lord your God to the **test**.'" (4:7).

So, when Jesus says to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you **doubt**?" what is he referring to? Could it be the case that the message of this story is, "If only Peter had had enough faith, he would have believed that the 'ghost' coming to them across the tops of the waves was in fact Jesus? **What if faith** is *not* trying to walk on water, but is *rather daring to believe* that Jesus is with those of us who are *in the boat*, and with us as God himself, through any and every storm?

It makes for a **very different story**, doesn't it?

Matthew begins c. 14 of his Gospel by noting the growing concern over Jesus on the part of the political authorities of the day (cf. Herod's fear that Jesus is in fact a resurrected John the Baptist! -- 14:1). In Matthew's time -- *almost a half-century* after the time of Jesus -- the earliest Church was beginning to experience the full flowering of that concern in the form of growing **persecution** and **societal exclusion**. It was, i.e., a period of very "**rough sailing**" during which the earliest Christians had every right to fear the Church would cease to be. Matthew wants *his* Church -- and *our* Church -- to understand that when we are willing, at Jesus' command, to get "**in the boat**", and **be** the Church, and then **venture out** into ever *new* and *challenging* situations, in *mission* and *witness* in Jesus' name, that -- our **adversities**, and **adversaries** notwithstanding -- Jesus is **present**, and **powerful** to **preserve** us.

We can only **know** this, however, can only **prove** this to ourselves, by *first* committing ourselves to being **in the boat**, as a part of whatever missionary

journey Jesus calls us to. In **direct contradiction** of **common sense** -- which makes us want to figure out all the possible **costs in advance**, for the purpose of deciding if we can really **afford** them, and all the potential **difficulties in advance**, for the purpose of trying to figure out how to **avoid** or **minimize** them -- Jesus calls us, simply, to get in the boat, and **go**, and to **do** so **counting on** his being always present. Remember the promise Matthew allows to us hear Jesus making to his first followers at the very close of his Gospel? "And remember, I am **with you always**, to the end of the age" (28:20).

Discovering that **faith in Jesus** is not any sort of intellectual problem to be solved, but is finally the kind of **trust** which enables us to be faithful, in **visible, practical, and costly** ways -- not **without** doubts and fears but **in spite of** our doubts and fears -- begins with our simply **worshipping** Jesus. Acknowledging -- in our deepest souls and heart of hearts -- **who Jesus is**, and who is **the God** Jesus makes present in the life of the world, and what are **the purposes** of that God for the life of the world.

This is where the first disciples have come to by the end of this story. You will remember, on an *earlier* occasion, when they were in a storm on the Sea and fearing for their lives, how they woke Jesus, who then calmed the storm (8:23-27). At the end of *that* story, the best the disciples could manage was to ask, "What sort of man *is this*, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" **Now**, however, on *this* occasion, they have come to the point of **acknowledging**, "Truly you are the Son of God."

I think **that** is what this -- **tough, multiply complicated** -- story is finally about. **Worshipping** Jesus. Not trying to explain him, and certainly not trying to explain him away. And not trying to put him to any sort of test. Just worshipping him. Thankfully.