

Water Dance

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Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Romans 10:5-15

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?

'The word is near you,

on your lips and in your heart'

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to

shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’

“and as many as touched were made perfectly whole”

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Well, it seems that what we have here is just another crazy story from the New Testament. An outrageous tale of science defied, and logic evaded, and experience disregarded. It’s a story of things happening that can’t happen. And, as usual, as we are told, the disciples are amazed.

At various times people have tried to explain this kind of miracle story – maybe the sunlight was at such an angle that even though Jesus was standing on the shore, the glimmers off the water made it *look* as if he was walking on the water – kind of an optical illusion. Or perhaps he was walking out in a very shallow area, ankle deep – I was at Christian Island in Georgian Bay last weekend, and there you walk hundreds of yards out before the water goes above your knees. So maybe ...

Some others just reject the whole thing – indeed, in our colloquial expression, the phrase ‘he or she walks on water’ has actually become rather a put-down, a dismissive way of describing someone who is over-rated.

Then, quite apart from whether or how you believe the story, there is the question of its relevance. It is a little bit hard to see how Jesus walking on the water really addresses any of the pressing problems that human beings face. Problems of hunger, even starvation, and not only in the Horn of Africa. Problems of difficult

relationships, and financial stresses. Problems in our city and our country of cuts to services, and over expenditures on the wrong things. The mean-spiritedness we see emerging on so many levels in the political scene.

I think a number of Bloor Streeters made a church field trip out to Stratford to see *Jesus Christ Superstar* recently, and perhaps others have too. The opening scene is riveting – Roman soldiers marching on catwalks above and crisscrossing the stage, ragged disciples darting, hiding, regrouping. Along with that powerful music, electric guitars in rhythm designed to put your nerves on edge. Dum,dum, DUM. **DUM**, dump-de-dump. The music itself says – we’ve got a problem here.

And of course that is exactly what the situation was. Occupied. Oppressed. Not enough to eat. Unfair taxation. The machinations of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin working ambiguously with the Romans both to protect and to control the people. Not a good scene.

Then, in that context, and now in ours. Whether it is a matter of politics, or of economics, or of the intimate twists and turns of our personal lives, life is pretty difficult. Being a human being is seriously challenging. We *do* have a problem here.

So anything we read in the Scriptures, anything we hear or say in church, must be put to the test of that reality. We ask when we hear this or any story, ‘but what does it matter, what does it say to our lives?’

A few friends in a boat, crossing that big lake, on their way from one task of ministry to the next. Remember, they had just been part of an all-day preaching marathon that ended in the miraculous feeding of five thousand families. When they get to the other side, it will be endless healing of the sick, the blind, the sorrowful and struggling. They head off in the boat while Jesus takes time alone – but do they get the rest they need? No, a storm comes up, terrifying and dangerous. So this is a story about what happens when the going gets rough for the disciples.

And see what does happen. Jesus appears. If you know family systems theory, he is the perfect non-anxious presence. He is encouraging and happy to see them. The storm doesn’t bother him – he is a picture of insouciance. Of ease and light

heartedness. He is really dancing, blithe and nonchalant. The storm just doesn't matter that much. He doesn't deny their peril or evade their difficulty, but by his presence and his nature, he renders it moot.

For a moment, Peter is able to share this confidence, and he climbs out of the boat to go to Jesus. Apparently the water isn't ankle-deep though, because when he looks around him, he starts to sink! *Where's your faith?* Jesus says. *Remember your faith!* Peter recovers, and they both get into the boat, and the storm stops. Well, no wonder everyone is amazed.

What happened to Peter can happen to us. We get going on a project or new initiative, something that requires a bit of faith. Step out in a great burst of enthusiasm. But then, we look around us and see nothing but wind and waves. We quail. This is hard! This is scary! And then we start to sink.

Just now, literally this week, in this congregation we have stepped out of the boat in a couple of ways. Last Monday, as directed by the congregation, the Redevelopment Committee sent in a proposal to the General Council Office to consider bringing the national offices of the United Church of Canada to Bloor Street. We are saying, build something new with us. Of course we have no idea how that idea will be received. We are enthusiastic, but what if we are courting disappointment? What if we don't get our point across? What if it all goes sideways?

And Jesus says, Don't be afraid! Remember your faith!

Same thing with our new staff members, Evan and Don. It is delightful and exciting to start into a new ministry together. But it can be frightening too. It's always a bit scary to start up in a new team. We wonder, what is it going to be like? We think, what are they really like? Am I going to have to change? And perhaps they are thinking that too. Easy to start sinking.

And Jesus says, Don't be afraid! Remember your faith!

The thing about this walking on the water business is this. Our faith tells us that what we are about is bigger than our anxieties and fears. What we are about is bigger

than whether our hopes are fulfilled, or whether our expectations are met. Appearing in the midst of the storm, Jesus says, let's dance on this water. And then let's get over to the other shore and see what difference we can make.

Amen.