

In the Boat, In the Water  
Matthew 14:22-33  
August 10, 2008

Let's look at this story of Jesus walking on the water. He has sent the disciples ahead so that he can have a few moments of peace and quiet away from the crowds and, apparently, the disciples themselves. I mean, we understand this need, after having been quarantined with our nearest and dearest for all these months. A little time alone is a good thing.

They are all in the boat together, as Jesus had instructed them, and a storm comes up. They know the danger of the storm and the precariousness of their situation. So it makes sense that they are all afraid. That's not an unreasonable reaction to a storm at sea when you are in a small boat, at the mercy of the waves. It makes even more sense that they were afraid when they saw Jesus coming toward them, walking on the water in the wee hours of the morning. I thought it was a ghost, in fact, that was the only thing that made any sense to them at all.

Though they are scared, they are all in the boat together; no one is silly enough to leave the relative security of the boat. And Jesus says what Jesus almost always says, "don't be afraid. It's me." Jesus reassures them with his presence and calms their fears. Nowhere, no way does Jesus ask anyone to get out of the boat. Read it carefully. There is no invitation, no mention of an outstretched hand, no "come on over here" wave from Jesus. Absolutely no invitation or call from Jesus for anyone to get out of the boat. When the story is told in Mark and John, there is no mention of anyone getting out of the boat. But here in Matthew's version, we have our good friend Peter.

Peter comes up with the bright idea to walk on water himself, seeming to forget for a second that he is not Jesus, that the waves are still pounding, that Jesus himself has told him not to be afraid, to just calm down. Peter doubts that the ghost person walking on water is Jesus, so he demands a sign. Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. Peter initiates this whole thing. I imagine Jesus taking a deep breath, or maybe a couple, because, oh, Peter. Really? But he commands Peter to come. And predictably, Peter cannot walk on water and he cries out to Jesus to save him. Which of course Jesus does.

And what about the other disciples in the boat, watching this little episode? Though we don't read anything about their reactions, I can only imagine. Some eye-rolling, some mumbling about how hard-headed Peter can be, some "what are you thinking?" looks at him. The disciples in the boat are at least smart enough to stay put where they are safe. After all, Jesus had "made" them get into the boat in the first place, and they are obeying his instructions. And now, they have heard Jesus's assurance and seem to be willing to trust him.

Jesus chastises Peter for his little faith, asking why he doubted. Jesus uses this "you of little faith" phrase several times in Matthew, but this is the only time when he uses it with a singular "you" rather than a "y'all." It clearly refers just to Peter, the one who is exhibiting his doubt, not his faith, when he steps out of the boat.

This isn't how we usually think about this story. We usually think of Peter being the faithful one, the one who has large faith, not a little, the one willing to take a leap of faith and try to walk on the water. There is some truth to that. But what if we thought about it this way instead. What if Peter would have been more faithful by just staying where he belonged in the boat, where Jesus had asked him to be, where Jesus had tried to reassure him, where the other disciples were still sitting. What if that was a more faithful course of action than trying to walk on the water like Jesus? What if that is the little faith that Jesus describes?

Neither course of action is particularly easy. It of course isn't easy to take a leap of faith, or a leap of doubt as the case may be, like Peter. It isn't easy to risk making a fool of yourself, to risk failing spectacularly. But neither is it easy to stay put in the boat. It wasn't easy for the other disciples to sit there and trust in Jesus's assurances while the storm still raged around them. Doing nothing was difficult, especially when one of their own has stepped out of the boat. Maybe that was even more difficult, to remain calm in the midst of chaos. It took faith, faith in Jesus's power over the wind and waves, to stay in the boat.

At various times and in various circumstances, we need to be Peter, and at other times we need to be the other disciples. Sometimes, God calls us to be Peters, to get out of the boat, to take risks and leaps of faith. And sometimes God calls us to do what feels like nothing, to stay in the boat, to wait until the time is fulfilled, to wait for God's call to do something different. Peter and the rest of the disciples are both faithful, and they are both flawed. They each make mistakes in their following of Christ, and they need each other as balances. We have to discern whether in this time and in this situation, we're called to leap or to stay safely sitting on our posteriors in the boat, where it feels like we're doing nothing.

The story ends with Jesus and Peter returning to the boat, the wind ceasing, and the storm settling down. And then those in the boat say, "Surely you are the Son of God." Those in the boat, who now include Peter too, see Jesus with eyes of faith and worship him.

Regardless of whether we're in the water or in the boat, we too can see Jesus with eyes of faith and worship him.