ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*In Deep* Matthew 14:22-33

I have always wondered why I have not seen a lot more artistic renderings of Jesus walking on the water because it is one of the most vivid descriptions we have of him. Indeed, most of the time, when this passage appears in the lectionary, the line of thought most of us have is the amazing act of Jesus doing this. We also wonder about Peter and how foolish he was to get out of the boat, begin to walk, and then lose his nerve or his faith, and begin to sink.

The story becomes one about faith, about maintaining our faith, maintaining our focus on Jesus so that we do not sink beneath the waves of life. The story becomes about how Jesus is always going to be close at hand to save us, to pull us up from death to life. For anyone who has almost drowned, literally, or felt overwhelmed and lost in any other way, this is a powerful story—and all true, too, this *is* how Jesus wants to act in our lives.

However, when we look closer at Matthew’s Gospel, what we see is that Matthew was also hoping to deepen our understanding of how Jesus, *is the Son of God.* By showing how Jesus repeats God’s activities in the Old Testament Matthew also tells us who he is, and how Jesus is God’s desire to save us from sin, from hopelessness, from despair. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew will show us connections between who Jesus is, and who God has been throughout God’s long relationship with humankind.

And so, as we look at this morning’s reading, we find that the passage we just heard picks up right after last week’s story of Jesus’ miraculous feeding of 5,000 men, in addition to their wives and children.

The disciples had helped a great deal, too. They had distributed the food, and they had gathered up the remains of the meal—twelve baskets of leftovers. Even with their assistance in feeding the crowds, it was still a lot of work, and it must have been tired for all concerned, especially Jesus. However, Matthew tells us that Jesus, rather than depending on the disciples any longer, decides to pack them into the boat he had been using.

We do not hear it in the English translation, but the original Greek makes it clear that he did not just tell them to leave him. He did not just tell them to get into the boat, he compelled them—he ordered them into the boat.

Jesus then turned his attention back to the crowds and, all by himself, he dismissed that huge gathering of people. He makes sure that they have all gathered their belongings and started home. (The pragmatic side of me wants to also believe he made sure they picked-up after themselves, and made them take home the leftovers.)

Finally, he is all alone, and is able to take the time to go up the mountain to pray—this is what he had been wanting to do since before the 5,000 found him.

Finally, there is no one to ask him to heal them. There is no one hungry and needing a meal. There are no disciples around to ask another question.

Jesus spends a few hours alone, and then something happens. Something catches his attention. Looking out to sea, Jesus sees that there is a storm raging out there, on the sea of Galilee—out there, where the disciples are still in the boat. It was night, so he might not have been able to physically *see* them, but somehow he knows they are in trouble.

In that moment, he resolves to meet them exactly where they are: *“And in the fourth watch of the night,* (writes Matthew) *he went to them, walking on the sea”* [14:25].

We do not know why he decided to walk out to them. He could have just stopped the storm from where he was. We know this because, not long before this night, Jesus had calmed the raging sea with no more than a word [Matthew 8:23-27]—why not do the same thingagain?

One of the objectives of Matthew’s Gospel is to show the connection between God in the Old Testament, and the life of Jesus. Therefore, highlighting Jesus’ choice to walk on the waves is a deliberate recollection of what God did at creation. Matthew wants to show us how Jesus’ life and actions were clearly a deliberate re-creation of what God did at creation.

And so, when we read that Jesus “went to them, walking upon the sea,” we are meant to remember God’s conversation in the Old Testament with Job, when God asks him about the cosmos. God asks Job if he ever *“went upon the springs of the sea”* or walked in the recesses of the deep.” Earlier in the book, Job affirms that the Creator had trekked across the oceans before the dawn of humanity, saying that God *“stretched out the heavens and tramped on the waves of the sea”* [Job 9:8].

So, Jesus decides to walk on water because this is what God did at the creation of the world. The disciples, of course, do not yet make the connection—to the contrary, they are terrified because they think they are seeing a “ghost” [14:26]. As one commentator has observed:

*“Christ’s words to his worried disciples underscore his divine identity. And so, as he approaches the boat, he declares, “Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.” The common English translation of “it is I” obscures what the Greek really says, which is “I am” (egō eimi)—the same thing God says to Moses at the burning bush* (in Exodus): *“And God said to Moses, ‘I am’ (egō eimi)” (Exodus 3:14 Septuagint). If walking on water weren’t enough to reflect his divine status, Matthew’s Jesus repeats the very words of God.”*

As we heard, after Jesus pulls Peter up from drowning, gets him and himself into the boat—at which point the storm dies away—the Jesus of Matthew says, *“those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”* [v.33]

Was their response to Jesus’ walking on water? Was it to his rescue of Peter? Or was it because the storm ceased, and the world became calm again? Perhaps it was a combination of all three of these events.

Whatever it was, the disciples’ proclamation will reemerge at the moment of Jesus’ death. When Christ gives up his spirit and an earthquake ensues, a centurion and his associates at the cross declare, *“Truly this was the Son of God”* [27:54].

According to Matthew, during the Passion, the chief priests, scribes, and elders also unknowingly recall this moment when they say of a crucified Jesus, *“He saved others; he cannot save himself”* [27:42]. Yet, their sarcastic exclamation of Jesus being the Son of God at the cross confirms that by not saving himself from crucifixion, Jesus continues to save others—not from death by drowning, as he did for Peter, but from the death-dealing power of sin.

This is how Matthew began his Gospel. In the first chapter after the genealogy, after recounting Jesus’ birth, Matthew writes that the mission and goal of Jesus’ life is going to be to *“save his people from their sins”* [1:21]. The reiteration of Jesus’ status as “Son of God” at the cross indicates that he has accomplished this salvation through his death.

More than anything else, what Matthew wants to show us is that Jesus was and is always in the deep waters of life with us. What Matthew shows through the many ways in which he makes connections between God and Jesus’ history is that the divine objective has always been the same, and that Jesus is God’s most explicit and the most creative and self-giving action in history. Jesus is God’s literal excursion into the deep waters of life with us and because he is willing to be with us in the most chaotic, confusing and dangerous moments of our lives we need never feel alone or without hope.

Our problem is that we are prone to lose our focus—like Peter. And perhaps the most important thing to remember is that when Jesus comes to save us, he may do so in ways we do not expect or recognize at first. As znother writer has expressed it:

*Jesus' appearance in that place is so unexpected that the disciples don't even recognize him. Their first reaction in the face of this utterly unpredictable encounter is one of fear. Fright closes their eyes and hearts to the true identity of their visitor. Because they don't expect to see Jesus out walking on the water, they jump to a conclusion and decide they are seeing a ghost. Their fear sees only a terrifying apparition instead of their beloved teacher and master.*

Friends, all of this is our good news: that God has been acting throughout in ways that save our life and fit us for the next part of God’s mission. Our good news is that Jesus demonstrated this throughout his life, and especially here in this story where he literally goes into deep, turbulent waters to ensure the safety of the disciples, and even to pluck Peter out of the deep in his moment of weakness.

He will do that for us, too, in our moments of doubt and worry. When we are unsure about what to do about tomorrow; when we are in doubt about the events of today. In the midst of all the turbulence, even in the storms of life, Jesus is the Son of God whom we can trust. The question becomes: Will we do it? Will we trust God in Christ with all of our tomorrows as he leads us further into his mission? I hope so.

My prayer is that God brings this peace and assurance into our hearts and minds as we think about this story, perhaps as we read it again at home, most of all, as we live in its truth. May this be so. Amen.