

August 10, 2008
Matt. 14:22-33

GET BACK IN THE BOAT

The Gospel lesson today picks up where we left off last week. If you'll recall, Jesus had gotten in a boat and sailed from the western shore to the Eastern shore of the lake because he wanted to get away from the crowds when he heard the terrible news about John the Baptist. But the crowds went ahead of him and he couldn't get away from them, so there they were in a remote spot with nothing to eat. That was when Jesus took 5 loaves of bread and a few fish and fed, according to Matthew *five thousand men, besides women and children*.

And he never did get the chance to reflect and pray and grieve for the loss of John. So, according to Matthew, as soon as everyone is fed, he sends the disciples off in the boat and he stays behind.

You know, of all the New Testament stories, Jesus walking on water may be the most widely known in the secular world we live in. I heard a story on NPR a while back about an organization that takes handicapped people on wilderness adventure trips. The narrator was a paraplegic Native American from Minnesota and he was describing a trip into the boundary waters between the U.S. and Canada in the middle of winter. The first thing they did was venture out for miles over the frozen lakes. The Native American was very amused by several Australians who were part of the group because they were very anxious about walking out on the ice. He said: "Apparently, where they come from, only their deities walk on water."

It was actually quite a scholarly insight. The fact is that in the Bible and in other ancient texts, only God—or the gods if you were a Pagan—walked on water.

So when the writer of Matthew wrote this story down for a fledgling church with a post Easter perspective, they understood him to say: Here came the presence of God.

The first century readers would have understood some other things when they heard this story. First, a story about being alone at sea in a boat purposefully conjures up certain images. Our translation says the boat was being battered by the waves. The boat was being tormented by the sea. And even though several of the disciples were fishermen, probably none of them knew how to swim. And the sea was considered a dark and frightening place. No one knew what was underneath the surface, but when the wind got going, it could stir up all kinds of undesirable and unclean creatures, not to mention unwanted spirits.

So, the disciples are out there, it is 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, they are cold, and wet—not hungry because remember they have just had all the all you can eat special thanks to Jesus--and they are scared too death. That is the picture Matthew has presented. It's a peril on the sea story, reminiscent of one just a little earlier according to Matthew, when the disciples were in the boat with Jesus in a great big storm and they were freaking out while Jesus was sound asleep and he woke up and calmed the storm.

So, if you are a Biblical literalist, your going to have a difficult time explaining why, once they figured out it was Jesus walking toward them the first thing out of their mouths was not “can you do something about this wind please?”

Instead, Peter says "*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*" And the Lord says come, and sure enough, Peter is walking on the water. But he takes his eyes off the Lord for a minute and he starts to sink.

This story was one of the stories of the day for Vacation Bible School—the theme of the day was Jesus gives us the power to be brave. There was a theme for every day and a poster with some kind of cartoon –like picture representing the story of the day. So, on Friday we reviewed what we had learned and I was amazed at how much they remembered. But the walking on water story was definitely the most memorable. Even the three year-olds knew the basics (with a little prompting). One thing that was funny though was that several of the kids had gotten it in their heads that Peter drowned. “Jesus walked on the water, and Peter got out of the boat too, but he drowned.”

I’m guessing that the image of Peter sinking into the water made quite an impression. Probably because 2,000 years later, we still have a certain hard-wired apprehension about being caught in the water without a boat or a lifeline.

But in the story, Peter doesn’t drown, he only starts to sink and Jesus holds out his hand and pulls him up.

According to St. Augustine, the boat carrying the disciples is the church. The rocking and shaking—the tormenting of the boat-- is the storm of temptation. The wind is the enemy, the devil, always trying to keep that storm of temptations in life from calming down. But Jesus Christ is more powerful than Satan and is persistent on our behalf giving us confidence, strengthening us so that we are not jostled in the boat and thrown overboard.

Because, although the boat is thrown into disorder it is still a boat. And while it may be in danger from time to time, it alone carries the disciples and receives Christ and there would be certain death without it. *So, says St. Augustine, stay inside the boat and call upon God. (Sermon 75.4)*

Even though St. Augustine sometimes got carried away with his allegorical interpretations of Scripture, this one is pretty good, because, as we have been talking about for the past several weeks now, Matthew's Gospel more than any of the others is the story of the church.

The use of allegories to interpret and understand Scripture fell out of favor sometime around the beginning of the enlightenment period when the theologians starting examining the text with a more critical eye and the standard for scholarly Biblical interpretation became grounded in analysis of multiple factors such as the context of the story, the context in which it was written, the historical traditions, the understandings of the writers and the relevance to the reader. Just an aside – it was not until uneducated, barely literate itinerant frontier preachers of the 19th century that anyone ever suggested that the Bible was supposed to be a scientific or historical document to be read literally.

Anyway, scholars have been pretty consistent from the earliest days in understanding Matthew as establishing the model for the church. It is only in Matthew where Jesus said:

¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. [Matt. 16]

Matthew describes the church variously as the body of Christ, or the kingdom of God on earth. One body with many working parts and many failures. The church is the location—physically and spiritually, for kingdom living even as it fails to operate according to it's own paradigm.

So, Augustine's allegory of the church as a safe haven, always subject to the temptations of the world—Augustine might have said the temptations of the City of Man rather than the City of God—is still a good one.

Better than some I have heard from time to time, like:

“Follow Jesus and you can have it all. Your sorrows will be turned to joys, your gray skies will turn blue. Jesus wants you to succeed and prosper. Just come to Jesus and life will always be smooth sailing.”

Or: If you believe enough you will win the football game, or the election, or your terminally ill spouse will recover.

Or worse: If your faith is strong enough there is nothing you can't do in this life. You too can walk on water if you are walking with Jesus. But only if your faith is unwavering. Take your eyes off him and you will sink and you will drown.

You know, that is not what happened here. Jesus sent his disciples out on their own straight into a stormy sea. And Peter's reaction is a very human mixture of faith and doubt that most disciples experience at some point in their lives. We hear the Word of the Lord and we know the security we can find there, but we are battered by the storms of life. Like Peter, we can become frightened and begin to sink. God understands that. It doesn't mean we are weak sinners.

Well, of course we are weak sinners, but it's not our moments of doubt or fear that make us sinners.

So, the message from Matthew is not “if your faith is strong enough spectacular results will follow.” No, the message is this:

Christ sends us out into the storm of life to share the good news of salvation and love for each other, but he doesn't send us out alone. When you have doubts, when you have fear, when you think that life is handing you way more than you can handle, get back in the boat. Get back in the boat, listen to the Word of God and remember his promise that his spirit is with you always and forever.