

## Walking on Water

Today's Gospel plants us in the middle of an incredible situation. Having just learned that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by King Herod, Jesus wants a few private hours to grieve and pray for John's soul. He may also need time to rest after feeding the mob of over five thousand people who came to him for healing. Before going off alone, Jesus sends the disciples across the Sea of Galilee to Gennesaret, expecting to catch up with them the next day. But a storm comes up and batters the disciples' boat, so Jesus goes out to rescue them. Seeing their master walking toward them across the waves, the panicked disciples mistake him for a ghost. When Jesus identifies himself, Peter responds, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." When Jesus says "come," Peter gets out of the boat and manages to take several steps toward Jesus before the wind and waves get the better of his courage and he starts to sink.

This isn't something you see every day. Various editions of the Bible title this episode "Jesus Walks on the Water" but, once you get past your immediate amazement, Jesus walking on water really isn't all that big a deal. We can almost expect the only begotten Son and holy Word of God, the man who can heal the sick with a touch, resurrect the dead, and multiply five loaves of bread and a couple of fish into enough food for thousands of people, to be able to walk on water. It makes sense that the laws of earthly physics don't apply to him. The real miracle here isn't that Jesus walks on the water but that, however briefly, Peter does. Peter has to know that he can't walk on water, at least not without divine intervention. So, why does he try? And why does Jesus help him?

The traditional interpretation of this passage ignores Peter's motivation and focuses on the fragility of his faith. Peter should never have allowed himself to be distracted by the storm, his critics argue. Had Peter only kept his eyes firmly fixed upon the Lord, he could have

completed his miraculous walk into Jesus's embrace. The lesson in Peter's failure is that we, too, must always keep our eyes upon Jesus. If we do, the preachers promise, we will be able to accomplish miraculous things.

Before we start piling on Peter for his human failings, let's at least try to be fair to him. If Peter hadn't had unshakeable trust in Jesus, he never would have ventured out of the boat in the first place. He overestimated his own strength, but which of us has never made a similar mistake? Although Peter faltered, he was faithful enough that he managed to pull off a minor miracle. That, I think, is deserving of praise.

We also need to consider how Jesus interacts with Peter here. When Peter says "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water," it's kind of an oddball request. Jesus could have replied, "Of course it's me. Just stay where you are and I'll get you all to shore." Jesus could also have calmed the storm before it capsized the boat. It's what he did a few chapters earlier in Matthew's Gospel, and it's what he does again at the end of this passage. Instead, Jesus allows the storm to rage on a little longer, giving Peter an opportunity to attempt the impossible and, for one brief, shining moment, to actually succeed. Jesus is clearly creating a teachable moment. So, what's the lesson that Jesus wants Peter, the disciples, and us to learn?

Perhaps we should start by considering how people behave when they're under pressure. In crises, we often do thoughtless, even ridiculous things. One of my favorite examples comes from the writings of Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*. In his second collection of essays, Reverend Fulghum describes how a team of firefighters responded to an emergency call at an apartment building, where they found a mattress on fire. After putting out the blaze, they asked the tenant how the fire started. The tenant replied, "I don't know – it was on fire when I lay down on it."

Lying down on a burning mattress was a really foolish thing for the tenant to do, but it undoubtedly made sense at the time. Perhaps you've never had occasion to look back on the mistakes you made in high-stakes moments and wonder, "what was I thinking?" If so, I admire your wisdom; if not, welcome to the human race. You're in excellent company.

The disciples are terrified because they think they're about to drown. They forget that Jesus put them in the boat in the first place, and that they've seen him calm a storm at sea before. They're not in any real danger, no matter how dire things look. Jesus standing patiently on the water while Peter takes a few awkward steps toward him reminds me of a parent watching a baby trying to walk for the first time. That image echoes in Jesus's words when Peter starts to sink: "you of little faith." The word Jesus uses, *Oligopisté* (ὀλιγόπιστοι), isn't the stinging rebuke some Bible scholars claim. It's a playful nickname that a parent might use when picking up and comforting a fallen toddler. Jesus isn't condemning Peter here – he's encouraging him.

As Bible scholar Douglas R. A. Hare observes, this is the moment where Peter begins to emerge as first among the disciples. Of the twelve, Peter is always first to follow Jesus's lead, even when he doesn't quite understand what's going on. Peter sees Jesus walking on water, so he attempts to imitate his master and, of course, he stumbles. Walking on dry land is hard enough. Trying to walk on a surface that can't possibly support you borders on insanity, but Peter still tries to follow his Lord. When the ferocity of the storm overwhelms him and he begins to sink, Peter immediately cries out, "Lord, save me!" And that, when the going gets tough and our own strength fails, is exactly what we're supposed to do.

Peter was destined to become the rock on which Christianity would be built. Time and again, he stumbled in his efforts to follow Jesus; time and again, he got back up and tried again when others might have thrown their hands in the air and quit. To accomplish the extraordinarily

difficult tasks that Jesus had in store for him, Peter needed to learn that he was capable of doing marvelous things. But more than that, he needed to practice asking Jesus for help and forgiveness when he couldn't accomplish those marvelous things on the very first try. It's a skill that the rest of us are wise to cultivate.

Elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus assures us that, if we have faith no larger than a mustard seed, we can move mountains. He's absolutely right that faith gives us the hope and tenacity to accomplish things that, in hindsight, seem almost miraculous. However, I don't think he means that we should take crazy risks just to demonstrate our faith. People aren't meant to walk on water. Unless there's a really good reason to try it, Jesus might prefer us to use our God-given common sense and stay in the boat while we wait for further instructions.

When circumstances demand action, though, we may have to get out of the boat whether we want to or not. When that happens, we're wise to pause, pray, and consider whether we're in the midst of a genuine crisis, or whether it just looks that way. We can pray for guidance on how to respond. We can ask Jesus to calm the storms in our lives. And if fear trips us up as we try to follow his guidance, we can always cry out to Jesus, asking for his strong hand to lift us out of the water before we sink and drown.

You've probably figured out that I have a huge soft spot for Peter. He's an excellent role model for the rest of us, followers of Christ who inevitably succumb to uncertainty from time to time. We, too, are sometimes *Oligopisté*, and that's okay. So, before we judge Peter or one another too harshly, we do well to remember what the great Carl Sagan once said. "Let us temper our criticism with kindness. None of us comes fully equipped." On land or water, we are called follow in Jesus's footsteps even if we stumble now and then. As we attempt to follow, may we remember that, when we ask, Jesus will catch and comfort us whenever we start to fall. Amen.