

Sermon: Water Walking Faith

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, August 13, 2023)

“If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat”. A catchy statement, and the title of a book written by author and pastor John Ortberg. It actually is quite an inspirational book, challenging readers to step out on the risky waters of faith, to recognize God’s presence in one’s life, to grow through failures, to learn to discern between faith and foolishness, to wait upon the Lord, and to connect more deeply with God.

But the central problem I have with the statement, is its opening conditional clause: ‘If you want to walk on water’. You see, I really don’t want to walk on any water, and I suspect most of you do not either. I really prefer the safe confine of a solid ground, of knowing that I will be supported when I take that next step, of having a firm foundation of life and faith, of not having to deal with the unknown, the irrational, or the miraculous. I like having to believe in things that I know to be true, and to trust in a proven and trusted source. Getting out of any boat to walk on any water is just not my cup of tea, no thank you very much. Which is what makes the story be Peter walking on water that much more remarkable.

The reading this week, in the Revised Common Lectionary, following the footsteps of Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus had just finished feeding the five thousand, on the northern shore of the sea of Galilee, in a somewhat deserted place, not too far from the fishing village of Capernaum, the home town of a number of disciples including Matthew, Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

After the miraculous feeding, the Scripture informs us that “immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after Jesus had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.” (Matthew 14:22-23).

This other side of the lake, or more specifically towards the southern side, is roughly a 21km journey, not an easy sail by boat, especially not during the evening. It is somewhat puzzling why Jesus would send the disciples across the lake without him. The Bible didn’t say. It is equally puzzling why the disciples didn’t object to such a request, to make that journey in the evening, especially given that there were a number of seasoned fishermen among the group.

In the summer of 2019, I had the chance to visit Israel with Daisy. It was a life long dream of ours, to visit the so-called Holy Land, the place where faith, both Hebrew and Christian, all began. We were part of a large study tour organized by the Bible Society from four different countries - with almost three hundred pilgrims jammed into six tour buses.

As customary, we visited the lake of Galilee on a sight-seeing boat (reportedly converted from an actual fishing boat, but who knows). That particular tour departed from the archeological site of Capernaum, took us to the middle of the lake and back. It was sunny with mild wind and mesmerizing wave, a relatively smooth ride. What stood out to me when we were on the emerald green water, looking towards the horizon on all sides, are the steep hills surrounding the lake. You see, the Sea of Galilee is the second-lowest lake in the world (after the Dead Sea), at about 200 meters below sea level. Its geography, when weather conditions aligned, naturally invites wind from four sides to be funnelled rapidly down the middle, creating dangerous gusts and crashing waves.

Peter and the rest of the disciples would've known this, should've have just parked their boat on shore, to wait out the night, and to wait for the return of their teacher after his solitary time of prayer. Yet, they complied with the direction of Jesus, and set off on a potentially treacherous journey into the night. So it is no surprise, that we are informed in the following verse, "but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them." (v.24).

During my tour of the region of Galilee, we were taken up to a mountain (more of a hill) on the shore of the lake near Capernaum. Although the Bible never specify the location, but that mountain/hill was believed to be the site where Jesus first sat down in Matthew chapter 5, and preached the Sermon on the Mont, beginning with the Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". It is also believed to be the site where he returned with the disciples post-resurrection, in Matthew chapter 28, and gave the Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

On that mountain/hill, the entire region can be seen clearly on a sunny day. Decapolis (or a group of ten cities) to the east, Tiberius (the newly constructed 1st century capital) to the west, and the region of Gennesaret to the south. On that same mountain, probably, was where Jesus, in today's passage, went up to pray alone, after sending the disciples off into the middle of the lake, in the middle of the night. My point is when the storm hit the boat, Jesus knew it, saw it, but left the disciples to deal with it through the night. Perhaps there is a lesson there for us. Sometimes, God intentionally leave us to deal with storms of our lives, just so we be battered and bruised, to be reminded of our smallness and to re-remember our total reliance on our maker.

Coming back to the Scripture passage, in verse 25, "And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, 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.” (v.25-27)

Fear, being afraid, is a natural human condition, an instinctual human response. One could even argue that fear is what keeps humanity as a species alive, as we are conditioned to fear and to flee from dangers, known or unknown. In the case of the disciples, already battered by the storm, now seeing a ghostly figure walking towards them through the same storm, their fear is absolutely understandable.

But fear can also paralyzed us - it closes our eyes to what is true, closes our hearts to what is good. Have you noticed how many times in the Bible when humankind encountered the divine - be it a messenger, an angel, or even the Godself — the initial response was always that of fear? Have you then noticed the same comforting assurance from the divine was always “do not be afraid”. Easier said than done. This is where Peter’s request is so remarkable, in verse 28, “Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.”

Faith, or *pisti* in Greek, has two necessary and intersecting components - that is belief and trust. ‘To believe’ is more of an intellectual assent, of knowing and affirming what is true. It does not necessary require iron-clad proof, but rational thinking certainly helps. Whereas, ‘to trust’, it is more of a surrendering, to give in to what you believe, to even stake your life on it.

Charles Blondin, the 19th century French tight rope walker made his fame performing unimaginable feat before cheering crowds. On July 15, 1859, he hung a rope across the Niagara Fall, and as his fans looked on with shock and awe, Blondin crossed back and forth seemingly with ease while carrying a pole, then in a sack, then on a bicycle, then pushing a wheelbarrow. After demonstrating his mastery with the wheelbarrow on the tightrope, while the crowd watched with ‘oooohed’ and ‘aaaaahed’, Blondin asked his audience, “Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?” Of course the crowd shouted that yes, they believe! It was then that Blondin posed the question - “Who will get in the wheelbarrow?’ Of course, none did¹.

Evidently, Blondin’s cheering fans believed, but had not trusted. Peter, on the other hand, believed in Jesus, and upon being invited to cross that threshold, to come, to step out of the boat, he trusted. “So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” (v.29-30).

¹ Creative Bible Study, <https://www.creativebiblestudy.com/Blondin-story.html>

I don't think we should be too harsh on Peter. It was after all during a storm, with winds, waves, and let's be honest...WALKING ON WATER. One could really only take on so much belief and trust before fear and doubt become too overwhelming. Faith, let's be honest at least in the way we practice, has its limit.

Peter, when push comes to shove, as he began to sink into the water, called out to his master, "Lord, save me!". In verse 31, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Faith, according to the author of Hebrews in chapter 11:1, is "the assurance of things hope for, the conviction of things not seen". Faith, according to the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:8, is also a gift from God, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.", and in Philippians 1:29, "For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well." It is in such an understanding of faith, as God's gift to us that we come to know and proclaim in Living Faith 6.1.2 that, "*God brings us to faith in many ways. We may have trusted in God from childhood; or our faith may have come later in life. Faith may come suddenly or only after a struggle to believe. Whatever the spiritual journey we have traveled, God honours our faith, great or small.*"

It is with such an understanding of faith that I have come to re-evaluate the words of Jesus to Peter, not as a rebuke, but as a continuing invitation to follow him, in belief, in trust, and in faith.

You of little faith, why did you doubt? Do you not know that I am the Lord God who created the heaven and earth, who commands winds and seas, even storms in you life? Haven't you come to realize that faith is not based on your own ability to believe, nor your own willingness to trust, but entirely based on my gracious gift to you, through the death and the resurrection of Christ. Haven't you come to realize that walking on water does not hinge on your ability to float, but hinges entirely on my invitation to 'come'. The same invitation I had given to you before, as I give to you now again: Come and follow me! Come!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.