

Matthew 14:22-33 Peter on the Water
August 13, 2023

Last week, we learned about the turning point in the career of Jesus, the time between the baptism and the Passion; as consisting of a series of events that include the Feeding of the Multitude, the experience on the lake with Jesus Walking on the Water, Peter's Confession, which will come up in a few weeks, and the Transfiguration. It is our task in *this* morning's reflection to consider the meaning for us of the second in that series, Jesus on the Water.

It is, of course, not within our capability to explain how the phenomenon happened. In the modern era there have been some who believe that one should dismiss it as against God's natural scheme of things, and offer a symbolic interpretation instead. Most would, I think, insist as well that it be accepted as a supernatural event, a breaking in of the eternal into the natural realm.

We would be amiss and it would be a detriment to us if we allowed ourselves to enter into that debate, accept whatever answer satisfies us and let it go at that, failing to ask after its meaning, which is the question of the day.

Let me suggest that this debate over the supernatural in the scientific age has not been fruitful. It has been at the root of mutual rejections, rejections that run counter to the gospel spirit. Each person has their own story, we are trying to tell each other something.

Both by the things we insist upon, and our accepting and rejecting each other, we are telling our stories. Often these kinds of questions have a way of dredging something out of the depths, without requiring a person to share what is actually in the depths. Let us be gracious and accepting of those with whom we disagree.

Sometimes a comparison with other gospels is helpful. In the other two accounts of the incident (in the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John), the Peter encounter is not part of the story. So it is only with Matthew that Peter becomes the focus.

Before we get to Peter, let us think about the roll water plays in life and in the Bible. Water is an interesting part of the material of life. Physical life is not possible without it. Its presence on this planet was necessary to bring fourth everything that lives.

Yet if ingested in a certain way, brings the end of life. It is literally true, in order to remain alive, we must be saved *by* water, and also *from* water. Even today with all the excitement about interstellar space, there is as much mystery associated with ocean depths than anything else.

And whenever we read about water in the Bible, there are always several implications and references to consider. In the 1st chapter of Genesis in the great theological poetic narrative of creation, the universe is described as being made of water. God creates an expanse, and separates the water above the earth

from the water below it. In the flood the earth is swallowed in water.

And water illustrates many things; baptismal things, immersions, which means both cleansing things; death and resurrection things. Literal water, which is needed for life, is set next to Living Water, which is associated with Eternal life. In this story, the action is in a boat on a lake, and the water is stirred.

Now let us turn to Peter. I doubt that stepping out of the boat was a matter of life and death for him, even though the conditions *were* dangerous. He was a fisherman and one would guess he knew how to swim, an assumption that is verified in the Resurrection story in John's gospel in which Peter dives out of the boat, on the same lake, and swims ashore.

The more pertinent issue for Peter was spiritual success. He was striving for a higher faith and risking failure. In this case Peter's more pressing fear was of the failure to succeed at faithful living. It was tempting to play it safe by staying in the boat with the rest of the disciples.

One thinks of the words of Jesus, "unless one takes up their cross, one can not be my disciple," or, "anyone who seeks his life will lose it, but anyone who loses his life for my sake *will find it.*"

Playing it safe may mean missing out on life's most rewarding experiences. It seems there is an actual life

lesson that could be in play, one that can be secularized. You can't win if you don't play, life is a risk, seize the day. But Peter was not seeking any kind of earthy satisfaction. Peter was attempting to be faithful in discipleship.

In general, the experience of the disciples was such that their understanding of who Jesus was and their faith was enhanced. But in the Matthew story, the focus ends up being on Peter, who has enough courage to step out of the boat, but felt in over his head once he was out on the water. The water that held Jesus up threatened to swallow Peter whole, and so he asked for help, more particularly he prayed for salvation.

Consider the suggestion that the salvation he prayed for was related more to his failure to walk as Jesus did than the threat of the stirred up water that could have taken him down. The greater threat was his lack of competence before the demands of discipleship, his failure to be able to save himself.

In this scene, Jesus is presented as a centered, well-integrated person who was confident in his identity and purpose, his capabilities and his limitations. At the center of this healthy sense of self is faith, and that explains his question to Peter, "O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Peter, on the other hand, and representing all of us, is presented as one who desires to be faithful. He is not asked to leave the boat, but himself asks permission

to leave it, yet in the middle of what looked like a successful experience . . . he wavered. Thus he is presented as not centered, self-divided, unsure and not confident. Consequently, this effort is seen as a failure of faith.

We know that Peter had failures in other situations; at the passion denying that he even knew Jesus, or in Antioch later when he refused to eat with Gentiles. Yet the overall place of Peter in early Christianity is significant. He was one of a small handful of believers who's impact rose above the others (along with John and Paul).

In this regard, we too are like Peter. We want to be faithful. Life confronts us also with challenging situations that require a faith that stretches us beyond our capabilities. When we find ourselves out of the boat on the waves beginning to sink. Might we also think of Peter's prayer, "Lord, save me?"

And experience the help that comes from the Lord, who turns the waters from a life-threatening danger into into a cleansing, life-giving source of health and wholeness? Our immersion into the stormy waters is our destiny and calling, and our failure seems as inevitable as was Peter's on the water.

And likewise our rescue, that when we see our plight not as something we can handle, but recognize that in every way deemed important we are helpless before the storm, we can follow Peter's example. Always remembering that we are in it for the long haul, and

that Jesus is there to gently chide us and help us to safety, until we are as firm in our faith as was Paul, another of the great apostles, who reminded us that . . . "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, will be saved."

[Back](#)[Home](#)