

Scripture Readings for Sunday August 30, 2020

Job 9:1-10,32-33 (NIV)

9 Then Job replied:

² “Indeed, I know that this is true. But how can mere mortals prove their innocence before God?

³ Though they wished to dispute with him, they could not answer him one time out of a thousand.

⁴ His wisdom is profound, his power is vast. Who has resisted him and come out unscathed?

⁵ He moves mountains without their knowing it and overturns them in his anger.

⁶ He shakes the earth from its place and makes its pillars tremble.

⁷ He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars.

⁸ He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.

⁹ He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south.

¹⁰ He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.

“He is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court.

³³ If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together.”

Isaiah 43:1-3a (NIV)

43 But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

Matthew 14:22-33 (NIV)

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. ²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” ²⁸ “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ “Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” ³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Sermon: Risky Faith that Trusts and Acts

Last week we considered the credibility-stretching account of the feeding of the 5000, where Jesus miraculously feeds the multitude with just 5 loaves and 2 fish.¹ This week's reading is another mind-bender: Jesus walks on the stormy waters of the Sea of Galilee, then invites Peter to join him, and later, when Jesus climbs on board the boat, the storm is stilled!² What are we to make of this? This is one of the so-called "nature miracles" that challenges a physicist like me; an individual healing is *easier* to accept than something as dramatic as this! It's problematic because – in essence - the miracle is one of physics, not biology. Skeptics have proposed an optical illusion to explain what happened. If that were the case, however, it can only be assumed that the disciples would have quickly discovered their error and this story wouldn't have been preserved for posterity! I think that instead of getting bogged down with the question, "Did it happen, and – if so – *how*?", it is better to ask, "What does this *mean*?" In other words, "How would this story be understood by Jews of the day?"³ As we saw with the feeding of the 5000, that event pointed to "someone greater than Moses being here,"⁴ so perhaps we can expect this account of Jesus walking on water to also reveal something about his *identity*.

Matthew starts by Jesus telling the disciples to go ahead of him by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.⁵ Jesus then "went up on a mountainside by himself to pray," *alone*.⁶ After Matthew's dramatic account of the feeding of the multitude, this has echoes of Moses going up the mountain to meet with God. The boat containing the disciples was some considerable distance from the land and it was, we're told, *nighttime*. Moreover, they were experiencing a storm and were struggling against a headwind; the boat was taking a beating!⁷ However, unlike the earlier, similar story where Jesus reportedly calmed a storm,⁸ there is *no* mention here that the disciples were afraid they would drown. We are then told that somewhere between 3 and 6am, Jesus came *walking* to them *on* the lake.⁹ It was this sight, *not* the storm, that filled them with *fear*.¹⁰ What is going on? Is it a trickster? A magician? An evil spirit? Of course, they *know* people don't walk on water and so they rationalize what they saw as being a "ghost" - a spirit from the dead - and they were *terrified*.

¹ Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15. See also:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Gods-Compassion-and-Lavish-Provision.pdf> .

² Matt 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-56; John 6:16–21. (See also Matt 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25.)

³ We should resist interpreting the situation in a Greek context. Greek mythology contains stories about divine heroes – demigods - whose human mothers had been impregnated by one of the gods, and who therefore had the power to walk on water by virtue of their divine origin. Although non-Jewish readers of the gospel story may have been inclined to see Jesus as being placed in the same class of these mythical heroes, it is *most* improbable that Matthew intended such a comparison!

⁴ See also Matt 17:1-8; Heb 3:1-6. See also Deut 18:15,18.

⁵ Matt 14:22.

⁶ Matt 14:23. Mountains – where sky and earth meet - are traditionally places where holy people encounter God. Note: humans pray, divine beings don't! Whatever happens next, Matthew (like Mark) *begins* by stressing the *humanity* of Jesus. (The latter heresy of Docetism denied the real humanity of Jesus – see 2 John 1:7.)

⁷ Matt 14:24; Mark 6:48 describes the disciples "straining at the oars." (Some have linked this to the Church's persecution.)

⁸ Matt 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25.

⁹ Matt 14:25. v26 repeats that claim.

¹⁰ Matt 14:26.

Let us pause and remember that in that culture, the unpredictable, turbulent sea symbolized the embodiment of all that was evil.¹¹ The psalmist and the writers of Job and Proverbs speak of the stormy sea and its monsters as dark powers that threaten the goodness of God's created order. Only *God* can confine chaos, that is made clear in the opening lines of Genesis 1. And for the Jews, this was vividly demonstrated in the crossing of the Red Sea in the time of Moses and, later, when Joshua led the people through the River Jordan when entering the Promised Land.¹² This imagery is also referenced at the end of the book of Revelation, where the new-heaven-and-earth is described as no longer having a "sea,"¹³ signifying that evil and chaos will be eradicated. But for now, chaos and order coexist in tension, one that is destructive – as in hurricanes - and, ironically, creative too.¹⁴ As I mentioned a moment ago, the Jews understood that God *alone* could tame or limit the powers of the sea.¹⁵ We heard in our earlier reading from Job, "He alone treads on the waves of the sea."¹⁶ While *we* think of walking on the water as defying gravity, 1st century Jewish readers would see Jesus is exercising a prerogative that belongs to God alone.

Jesus then speaks to his disciples: "Take courage! *It is I*. Don't be afraid."¹⁷ Those words "It is I" are the equivalent of the divine "I am" that God spoke to Moses from the burning bush.¹⁸ In walking on the water, Jesus *does* what only God can do, and now he *speaks* words that Jews associated with God himself. We need to pause, take a deep breath, and absorb all of this! These mysterious actions and words link Jesus with God, the Liberator and Redeemer of Israel, who is at the same time the Creator of the world and the victor over chaos.¹⁹ Note, this need not be seen as a publicity stunt that commanded allegiance;²⁰ no one else was there except his disciples and Jesus already had their loyalty. Rather it was an unforgettable teaching moment that revealed to the disciples exactly *who* it was they were following.²¹ This is an *epiphany* – a revelation - and we should see this incident in same light as the Transfiguration that Matthew later reports in chapter 17.²²

¹¹ See Reddish, *Science and Christianity*, (Wipf & Stock, 2016), 155-163.

¹² See Exod 14; Josh 3.

¹³ Rev 21:1.

¹⁴ Creative new possibilities arise from the interplay of chance (chaos) and necessity (law); this is part of divine providence. (See [11].)

¹⁵ Part of the mystery if evil is that it remains ever threatening.

¹⁶ Job 9:8; 38:16 and in 9:10 we read: "He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed." See also Ps 77:16-20; Hab 3:15.

¹⁷ Matt 14:27. See also the divine address in Isa 41:10,13,14; 43:1,5; 44:2,8; 54:4,14.

¹⁸ Exod 3:14 - God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

¹⁹ Recall Matthew's commentary on the angelic message to Joseph links Jesus to *Immanuel* ("God with us") Matt 1:22-23. Another scholar puts it this way: "Matthew is *not* claiming Jesus is a divine being (divine beings do not pray – Matt 14:23), rather he is the Messiah whom God has endowed with a supernatural power. Jesus had miraculous ability *not* by (divine) nature but by having it *conferred* upon him – see Matt 28:18. This walking on the water is evidence of divine empowerment, not divinity, and that is demonstrated by the fact that Peter is enabled do the same."

²⁰ This point needs to be seen in the context of the 2nd temptation of Jesus in the wilderness; Matt 4:1-11.

²¹ Mark 6:48 underscores this point with an allusion Matthew omits: Jesus meant to "pass by" the disciples, as God passed by Moses (Exod 33:18-23) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:11).

²² Matt 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36; 2 Pet 1:16-18. This epiphany can also be considered an theophany.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who presents the subsequent dialogue between Jesus and Peter, and his walking on the water. I want to spend the rest of this sermon exploring that aspect. Peter says, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."²³ It's a bold, perhaps impetuous, thing to ask. Yet Peter knows that this is *not* something he can do on his own initiative, *Jesus* must empower him to do so.²⁴ Whatever God had endowed Messiah Jesus; Jesus shares it with Peter and invites him to come toward him on the water.²⁵ And we are told "Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus."²⁶ This act of obedience takes great faith and courage; let's not overlook or belittle that fact by what happens next. Bonhoeffer writes: "Peter *had* to leave the ship and *risk* his life on the sea, in order to learn his own weaknesses and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith."²⁷ I'll talk more about the meaning of faith shortly.

As Peter walks, he gets distracted by the wind and so takes his eyes off Jesus. His faith quickly turned into fear; and he begins to sink.²⁸ He cries out, "Lord, save me!"²⁹ and "immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him." Jesus then gently rebukes Peter, "You of little faith; why did you doubt?"³⁰ Such criticism must *not* overlook the fact that Peter earlier *obeyed* the command of Jesus to "Come." And note the Greek word for "doubt" here implies vacillating back and forth, rather than habitual skepticism.³¹ We could therefore see this as a story about a faithful follower of Jesus who becomes overwhelmed by circumstances around them, and so lose their nerve. Faith mixed with fear and doubt is where many Christians find themselves. Take heart, Jesus can still work with faltering faith; we read in the book of Acts about the man of faith that Peter became. Walking by faith involves *learning* to live with *uncertainty*, and learning to remain focused on Jesus - rather than the towering problems that threaten to engulf us, or the critical opinions of others.³² And that learning will inevitably have its ups and downs; we're human.

²³ Matt 14:28,30; 16:16; 17:14. The title "Lord" has various meanings and Matthew maybe being clever here – as it is an appropriate christological title for a believer to use. It is unlikely Peter uses these references to "Lord" as meaning YHWH (from the Greek *kyrios*). Nevertheless, this is one of those moments, like the Transfiguration, though which the disciples gain some understanding and insight into Jesus' identity and mission. (The "*if it is you*" could be translated, "*since it is you,*" Matt 14:28.)

²⁴ Matt 14:29.

²⁵ Matthew's readers will later understand Peter is not just a representative disciple in the boat, but also represents the Church; Matt 16:16-19.

²⁶ Matt 14:29.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (Collier, 1963), 68, emphasis mine. He goes on, "The road to faith passes through *obedience* to the call of Jesus . . . and if [people] imagine they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves. . ." Holzen also says: "Out of trust comes obedience. It is good to obey God, it is better to trust God. One can obey and not trust; one can also trust and not obey. Our relationship with God includes obedience born from trust," Wm. Curtis Holtzen, *The God Who Trusts*, (IVP, 2019), 46.

²⁸ Matt 14:30.

²⁹ See also Ps 69:1-3; Matt 8:25.

³⁰ Matt 14:31; 8:26.

³¹ See also Matt 28:17; Mark 9:24; 2 Cor 12:9.

³² This conclusion applies, I believe, to individuals, but also to the Church. (Many scholars link the boat to the Church.)

I often say that the line between faith and foolishness is *thin*, and sometimes we may wonder which side we're on! Now that phrase, "You of little faith." could also be translated, "You of little *trust*," and I think that makes better sense in this context. "Faith" is much more than "belief." It is *not* enough to say I *believe* in God or to simply recite the Creeds; the real question is, "Do we *trust* God?" As Curtis Holtzen puts it, "The opposite of faith is *not* doubt but *distrust*."³³ Faith involves *trust*, and trust invokes *risk*, and *trust* is demonstrated by *action* or *obedience*. We see that in Peter getting out of the relative security of the boat and taking those first steps toward Jesus. The notion that faith that involves trust, risk, and action describes *all* human relationships, because faith is *relational* or *personal*. Peter trusted *Jesus*; "Do we trust *God*?" Dare we as individuals - and as a church - *trust* God to the point that we *risk all*, and being aware of the dangers, still *act*? *Will* we, like Peter, leave the security of our "boats" and courageously follow the invitation of Jesus to "Come"? William Willimon summarizes it like this, "If Peter had *not* ventured forth, and *not* obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition *of* Jesus and of being rescued *by* Jesus." He continues, "I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the *risk*; you have to *prove* his promises through *trusting* his promises - through risk and venture."³⁴

Matthew concludes, "When they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."³⁵ The wind dying down reverts back to that earlier *epiphany* and Jesus being witnessed as master of the winds and waves.³⁶ And *through* this experience, the disciples come to recognize that Jesus is the "Son of God," and they *worship* him; that act in itself would be blasphemous to devout Jews. The title "Son of God" means "belonging to God"³⁷ and is synonymous with "Messiah" or God's Chosen One.³⁸ It is only *through* the turbulent experiences that arise *along* the journey of faith that we can truly know that Jesus is *Immanuel*, "God with us."³⁹

Finally, in these uncertain times, and in whatever we are personally facing this coming week, may we hear the words of Jesus, "Have courage! *It is I*. Don't be afraid." Amen.

³³ Wm. Curtis Holtzen, *The God Who Trusts*, (IVP, 2019), 42-46. Faith in *much* more than "belief in," i.e. intellectual assent.

³⁴ Our fears are real and legitimate; that means we have understood the risk. But will we still act out of trust?

³⁵ Matt 14:32-33. This is a very different ending from Mark 6:51-52. Instead of utter astonishment, lacking understanding, and hardened hearts, we have a falling down and worshipping Jesus confessing that he is the Son of God. This *worship* is bold - and blasphemous to devout Jews.

³⁶ See also Matt 8:26-27.

³⁷ This "belonging to" is also *relational* and, in this case, also indicates mutual trust.

³⁸ See Matt 16:16.

³⁹ Recall Matthew's commentary on the angelic message to Joseph links Jesus to *Immanuel* ("God with us") Matt 1:22-23.