

## **"Save Me!"**

Rev. Jeff Bacon

August 9, 2020

Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, save us; embrace our doubts and be with us in the storms of life. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

I'd like to begin with a short video clip from an old movie that depicts Jesus and Peter walking on the water; and Jesus responding to Peter's cries of "Save me!" and then climbing back into the boat with Peter.

### **[Video Clip]**

It's an interesting interpretation of our gospel reading this morning and for me, it brings the reading alive: the crowds of people who had just been fed; the chaos of the storm; Jesus and Peter walking on the water; and then the profound impact of Peter's experience as Jesus and Peter join the disciples back in the boat, "Truly you are the Son of God."

The sea, in Old Testament biblical thought, signifies chaos, sometimes including forces of evil that are held at bay by the powerful forces of God. Jesus overcomes the chaos by walking on the water and calming the sea, a feat that is reserved for God alone. In Job, God "alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea;" and in Isaiah, God alone "makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters." Jesus does what only God can do and speaks with the voice of God, for in Jesus' assurance to the disciples, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," the words "it is I" are the same Hebrew words as "I AM" that God uses to identify God's self to Moses, "'I AM WHO I AM' ... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Jesus, with the power of God walks on the water and calms the sea.

This is miraculous, like the feeding of more than 5,000 that Lorraine read about last week! But Jesus seemingly chastises Peter by saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Does this mean that if Peter had more faith and did not doubt that he might have been able to walk on the water like Jesus, the Son of God? Is it a call for each of us to have more faith; more than just a little faith the size of a mustard seed; more than the faith of Peter; enough faith to walk on water and calm the chaotic sea like Jesus?

John Ortberg, in his book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, tells us that "researchers at the University of California at Berkeley did an experiment sometime ago that involved introducing an amoeba into a perfectly stress-free environment. Ideal temperature, optimal concentration of moisture, constant food supply - the amoeba had an environment to which it had to make no adjustment whatsoever. So you would guess that that was one happy little amoeba. Whatever it is that gives amoebas ulcers and high blood pressure was gone.

Yet, oddly enough, it died.

Apparently, there is something about all living creatures, even amoebas, that demands challenge. We require change, adaptation, and challenge the way we require food and air. Comfort alone will kill us.

When teachers want students to grow, they don't give them answers - they give them problems! It is only in the process of accepting and solving problems that our ability to think creatively is enhanced, our persistence is strengthened, and our self-confidence is deepened ... Just as our bodies simply will not grow stronger without being challenged to the point of exertion, so it is with our mind and spirit."

The disciples in the boat during the raging storm were being challenged to the point of exertion physically, mentally and spiritually. And in that challenging experience, several miracles are revealed. It may seem that

Jesus, the Son of God walking on the water is the main miracle. Everyone knows that Jesus miraculously walked on the water. There's even a lizard that can run across the water called the Jesus Christ lizard! It might also seem that the main miracle is that the disciple Peter, an ordinary man, was also able to walk on the water for a short time. But, in Matthew today, walking on the water merely sets the stage for the main miracle. This miracle is that in the midst of the chaos of our lives, Jesus joins us in the boat and gives us hope.

Jesus approaches the boat during the darkest part of the night, just before dawn. The disciples had been struggling in the stormy sea against the wind and waves all night and they're afraid. Then they see Jesus walking on the water and they're even more afraid – they think he's a ghost. And then Jesus calms the storm and responds to Peter, "Come."

Peter shows great faith and he gets out of the boat; out from the comfort and support of his fellow disciples; and out from everything he knows about the sea as a seasoned fisherman. Peter has been in the chaos of the storm and focussing on staying afloat in the boat for some time, yet for a short time after Jesus says "Come," Peter is focusing on Jesus, he gets out of the boat and he walks on the water, rising above the chaos that surrounds him. Then Peter begins to notice the strong wind and storm again. Did you notice the wind and storm resuming in the video clip? Peter begins to be afraid, he begins to doubt, and he begins to sink. Peter asked for miraculous proof of the presence of God by asking to be a part of the miracle. But then Peter begins to be afraid and doubts the miraculous presence of God in himself.

It's not that if Peter had more faith, he would have been able to walk on the water, or that if we have more faith, we could overcome all of our problems in spectacular, miraculous ways. Faith is not being able to walk on

water, only God can do that. Faith is knowing God well enough to know that God is with us in the boat, giving us hope as we make our way as a community of faith, tossed and battered by the chaotic forces of our world.

A little later in John Ortberg's book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, he says that "Most people I know wish, at least in certain points in their lives, that they had more faith. I know of people who torment themselves over having too little faith. They are certain that their lack of faith is the reason for an unanswered prayer, for spiritual weakness, or for a sense of distance from God." Ortberg quotes Martin Luther, the famous theologian of the Protestant Reformation who says that "It's the devil who puts such ideas into people's heads and says, 'Ah, you must believe better. You must believe more. Your faith is not very strong and is insufficient.'" In this way he [the devil] drives them to despair." Ortberg continues that "When people wrestle with doubt, they may tell themselves that they will try harder to have more faith. But faith is not the sort of thing that can be acquired by trying harder ... Never try to have more faith – just get to know God better."

Sometimes Jesus calls us to step out of the boat, but this is not a story about Jesus calling us to step out of the boat. Sometimes Jesus calls us to leave everything behind to follow him, but this is not a story about Jesus calling us to leave everything behind to follow him. Sometimes Jesus calls us to have more faith, but this is not a story about having more faith. This is a story of Jesus coming to us in our darkest times of difficulty and doubt, and telling us "Do not be afraid." And if we begin to sink in the midst of the chaos of our lives, Jesus reaches out to save us, and gets into our boat with us to give us hope and peace. The Son of God is revealed to us and is with us, giving us hope and peace in the chaos that surrounds us.

Thanks be to God for the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.