

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Isaiah 43: 1-3a; Matthew 14: 22-23
“Come to the Waters: In the Same Boat”
7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 12, 2015

The story of Jesus’ walk on the water is a favorite of cartoonists and comics. I combed the internet for no more than five minutes, and I found cartoons showing Jesus using his prodigious talent of walking on water to master the water hazards on the golf course, to shame his fellow gym rats as they huff and puff out the miles on their ordinary treadmills while he effortlessly outdistances them on his treadmill belt which looks like the Red Sea before God parted the waters, to lead his team to victory on the water polo pro circuit, and to take the triathlon title by such a huge margin that he was banned from all future competitions.

A Jesus who walks on the water is the darling of the cartoonists. Peter, not so much. One cartoon shows Peter with a kid’s dinky inner tube around his waist with the caption “Peter’s early attempt to walk on water with Jesus displayed an inadequate amount of faith.” Another reads, “Peter finds his faith to be much stronger in winter” as it shows him walking on, you guessed it, ice!

And pretty much everybody knows the old groaner of a joke that begins “A preacher, a priest, and a rabbi went fishing one day. Once in the middle of the lake, the preacher said ‘I seem to have forgotten my fishing pole, be right back’ and to the visitors’ amazement stepped out of the boat and walked on top of the water towards the shore. When he had returned, the priest said “I left my lunch on the bank. I’ll be right back.” The rabbi again watched in amazement. Once the priest returned, not wanting to be outdone, the rabbi said, “I forgot my iPhone.” He stepped out of the boat, and immediately, he sank. The preacher nudged the priest and said, “I guess that we should have told him where the rocks are.” (GROAN.....!!!)

I don’t know how the gospel writer Matthew would feel about all those jokes about the Master’s water walking feats. It is just my opinion, but of the four gospel writers, I would judge Matthew to be voted “Least Likely to Write For or Host A Show on Comedy Central.” Now, don’t get me wrong. Matthew’s gospel is good news, to be sure, but he sets up his story of Jesus from the beginning as Jesus threatening the whole Roman Empire simply by being born, so much so that the king orders all Jewish baby boys who were two years old or younger. The story that Matthew tells about Jesus starts out serious, and he pretty much keeps it that way throughout.

However, I think that the cartoons and the jokes might elicit a tiny chuckle or a wisp of a slight smile even from dour old Matthew when it comes to the story that is our Scripture lesson today because Matthew has framed this event in Jesus’s life as a story, a parable. Matthew would be pleased, I have to think, that people in today’s world are still reading his story, being captivated by it, and finding in it disclosure about the nature and character of Jesus, about themselves as human beings, and about the church. (1)

The story begins with people, people who are exhausted. The disciples have just worked as the wait staff for a banquet of more than five thousand people. And not only did they have to serve everybody when Jesus gave the order, “YOU give them something to eat!” but after the thousands of people had eaten their fill of loaves and fishes, the disciples had the daunting and thankless task of cleaning it all up. Twelve wastebaskets full of leftover trash, the Scripture says, filled to the brim by twelve bone-tired disciples.

Jesus apparently detected that they needed some R & R so, the text says, he made them get into the boat and head out while he stuck around and pronounced the final benediction and sent the crowds on their way. One also gets the impression that Jesus was pretty tired himself and maybe even needed a break from the disciples just as much as they needed a break from him because as soon as he waved good-bye to them as they headed off toward the beach, he turned and made tracks in the opposite direction for some alone time with God on the mountain.

As the story goes, a wind came up.

The commentaries point out that our English translations don’t really convey the fear and terror that the Greek does. The Greek word that is translated as “battered” literally means torture, torment, harassment. The Greek that is translated “the wind was against them” suggests severe opposition or hostility. A first-century

audience likely would have understood what we may miss, which is the utter terror of waters unleashed from their boundaries. In creation, God separated the waters with a dome above and below the earth. There was the ever-present fear that broken boundaries could unleash chaotic waters. Even though we moderns know that there aren't waters "up there" and "down there" that are going to be released to destroy us all in the way that it happened in the story of Noah and the flood, we appreciate the dangerous power of water. I, my husband, and our son witnessed it up close and personal one night in 1993 when the raging waters of a flash flood slashed through the French doors of the finished basement level of our St. Louis home and chunked the furniture across the room and flung all my books out the door so that our backyard became the floating theological library of East Watson Road. But even if you haven't experienced something like this, the word *tsunami* is a part of our common vocabulary and induces in us an awareness of the sudden and unpredictable danger of water. (2)

And so Peter was afraid.

Of course he was.

I know that I was afraid when stormy waters raged around me in my St. Louis basement. And this makes me feel a bit defensive on behalf of Peter and the other disciples. I am in the same boat with them, and so is nearly every other person that I know.

For even though Jesus comes to the disciples...and to us... and says "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," it is hard not to take him at his word because there seems to be so much to fear. I am not speaking here only of literal raging water. A colleague of DCPC member Elizabeth Jackson took the picture that is on the cover of today's bulletin, a photo taken in March of this year as Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, when the city and nation were overwhelmed by rain and flood. The photo conveys the fear, fear not only of water, but it captures a sense of the other fears that human beings experience: fear of the unknown, fear of disease, fear of crime, fear of terrorism, fear of people who seem to be different. There is a wonderful story that Joanna Adams has told about two little boys whose mother asked them to chase a chicken snake out of the henhouse. They looked everywhere for that snake, but couldn't find it. The more they looked, the more afraid they got. Finally, they stood up on their tiptoes to look into the top row of nests, and they came nose to nose with the snake. They fell all over themselves and each other running out of the chicken house. "Don't you know that a chicken snake won't hurt you?" their mamma asked them. "Yes, ma'am," one of the boys answered, "but there are some things that will scare you so bad you'll hurt yourself." (3)

Isn't it so true? Do we not see and experience the truth of this every single day: the more fearful we become, the more likely we are to hurt ourselves in the process of trying to protect ourselves. We see and experience it in our own homes when we shrink from trusting one another with our deep and intimate hopes, dreams, secrets. We see and experience it in our communities where we have increasingly sacrificed civility in our interactions with our neighbors and are quick to blame and distance ourselves from one another rather than recognizing that we have differences and speaking honestly and respectfully with one another across our differences in order that a common good might be achieved. We see and experience it in church where it becomes easier to split into yet another denomination rather than act like the brothers and sisters Jesus has taught us that we are. We see and experience it on the larger stage of our national lives whenever issues like *immigration* or *prison reform* surface in our public discourse.

The power of the story, however, the good news of the story that we have read today, is that Jesus reaches out to us in our fear. And he doesn't simply say, "Don't be afraid. Buck up. Try harder." Rather, he reaches out his hand to us and he accompanies us back to the boat and *he gets into the boat with us*.

A boat was one of the earliest symbols for Christianity and for the church, and this story indicates why it was so.

At last Sunday's 8:45 service, Maggie O'Brien shared an experience from her DCPC Nicaragua mission trip experience in June which says as well as any story can what it looks and feels like to be in the boat with Jesus.

"For me personally, people like Brian—one of the little boys that was part of our host family in San Felipe. It is a mystery to me how we formed such a close friendship with each other over such a short amount of time, perhaps I have God to thank, but I am so glad that we did. To give you a small idea of what kind of person Brian is, I'll talk about one instance when we were riding down the mountain in our big white bus and we approached a river in the middle of the road that was so wide and deep that I swear it was more like an ocean. Now, I'm sure the residents of Kilambe are used to crossing enormous bodies of water during their daily travels but for me, the only things that's ever crossed my path while in an automobile is a squirrel, so naturally I was a little nervous. Brian was sitting next to me on the bus when we came up to the river and I'm sure he could have easily started laughing

at the terrified look on my face but instead when he saw that I was scared, he grabbed my hand and squeezed it tight. He held my hand the entire time as we crossed the river and he didn't let go until we had made it safely to the other side and back on dry land."

This is what it looks like to be the church, a church that reflects the nature and character of Jesus in everything that we are and everything that we do.

And let us not forget, the boat that is the church is not to be a swanky party boat floating on a calm land-locked Lake Norman beneath cloudless Carolina blue skies. The boat that is the church is a vehicle that is on the move and headed somewhere. Where the boat is to be headed is answered in the next few verses in Matthew's gospel:

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. After the people of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. (Matthew 14: 34-36).

So, my friends, perhaps the good news for us in the story that we have read today is that we can leave the walking on water to Jesus. We just have to be in the boat with him, on the move toward the destination where we participate in healing.

1. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 166.
2. Marilyn Salmon, "Commentary on Matthew 14: 22-33," www.workingpreacher.org, August 10, 2008.
3. Joanna M. Adams, "Faith and Fear," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 1996, 27.