

“More Amazing Than Walking on Water”
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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John 6:16-24, Matthew 14:22-32

Today we continue our series of sermons on the miracles of Jesus by looking at a feat that he performs in three of the four Gospels. He walks on water. Only Luke leaves this miracle out. In each of the other Gospels' tellings, there are similarities and differences. In each instance Jesus has just fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, it has become dark, the disciples get in a boat and cross Lake Tiberias (otherwise known as the Sea of Galilee) by themselves without Jesus. In each instance, the craft they are in is battered by waves, and they see Jesus walking toward them, and he tells them "It is I. Don't be afraid!"

But in John they start off from the east side of the lake and go towards Capernaum on the western shore. In Matthew and Mark they start off on the western shore and head east towards Genesareth. In John the disciples want to take him in the boat and immediately they reach the place to which they are going. In Mark, the writer adds that Jesus had intended to pass by them on his way (perhaps he needed a little more time away from them) and that they were afraid, Mark says, because they forgot about the loaves. They forgot about the miracle they'd just witnessed. In Matthew's version, though, we have another wrinkle. One of the disciples, Peter, walks on water himself, at least for a few steps. Listen first to our reading from John, then to a reading from Matthew.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.' Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the lake saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

Our second passage is from Matthew's version of this miracle. Listen for similarities with John's version, and listen for what happens to Peter.

*Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but **by this** time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, 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.'*

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

Last August, when Judith and I were down on the coast of North Carolina visiting my in-laws, my brother in law and his wife took us out on their new boat. We set out from a little dock within view of the bridge that crosses the Intercoastal Waterway, linking the mainland with Emerald Isle. In the middle, the waterway is deep enough to accommodate fairly large craft, but as you move towards the shore on either side of the waterway, even some distance from the land, there are sandbars that are just slightly submerged when the tide is out. This makes for some fun photo ops.

So on my phone, I have shots of my wife Judith a good distance from land and twenty feet or so from the boat, arms stretched out, coming towards us looking for all the world like she's literally walking on water. I'm not saying that I hit the relationship lottery when Judith and I were married, but do any of the rest of you have a spouse or partner that can do that? Don't ask them.

Seriously though, as we were taking those photos, I couldn't help but have my mind drawn back to Jesus and Peter and the whole walking on water episode. Then I remembered the joke about the Catholic priest and the Presbyterian minister who took the new rabbi in town out on a fishing trip. They went out to their favorite spot and the priest got up and stepped out of the boat and he walked some distance on the water then he walked back and got in the boat. Then pastor did the same thing. He walked out some distance then he came back and got in the boat. Then the rabbi, feeling like he had something to prove and that the Christians shouldn't be the only ones who do this, got out of the boat on his side and promptly found himself sinking like a stone.

Before they reached into rescue him, the Catholic priest said to the Presbyterian pastor, "Do you think we should tell him where the rocks are?"

Our understandable Enlightenment-mindset tendency, when it comes to this particular miracle of Jesus, especially—or some of the others for that matter—is to look for reasonable explanations as to how he pulled it off.

I mean, it ran counter to what we understand to the laws of nature. So Jesus stayed atop the waves because, well maybe he knew where the rocks and sandbars were. Of course, given the size of Lake Tiberias, several miles across, that's a lot of rocks and sandbars, but our minds work very hard to discount and deny things that don't make sense to us.

Perhaps one reason the Gospel writers kept this particular miracle story in the mix, which after all was somewhat gratuitous, given that it had nothing to do with healing or helping anyone or even keeping a party going like the one at Cana—maybe part of the reason the Gospel writers kept this miracle in the mix, is to preserve the idea for the early Christians and for us that God really can make things happen that seem impossible to us. Even when the tide is high, even when the wind is whipping, even when there isn't a rock or a sandbar in sight.

One value in these miracle stories is that they keep our minds nimble and open to possibility in a world that can so often seem overwhelming and, frankly, scary. Stories that tell us that Jesus walked on water and Peter could have, too, if he'd just kept his eyes on Jesus rather than paying attention to the wind and waves and getting scared, weren't and aren't intended to get us to literally

walk on water ourselves. Though I will admit that I am intrigued by the notion that Madeline L'Engle advances in our Lenten study book that we have forgotten that we were made to do such things as children of God and that one day she herself might walk across her beloved Dog Pond. If you didn't read that in day 2, go back and read it. It's interesting. Madeline L'Engle believed so much in the power of the imagination.

That being said, there are a whole lot of other things that I have seen human beings do that are more impressive, frankly, than walking on water.

The reason the Gospels give for Jesus walking on water are the same as the answer to the age old question of why the chicken crossed the road. He walks on water to get to the other side. Like a parent who just wants some alone time away from the little ones, he needs a break from being in the boat with the disciples so he lets them go it on their own. But when the storm gets rough and the wind and waves get high and they are afraid, he cannot bear to leave them to handle it alone. So he comes to them walking on the waves, and seeing him, they are terrified, because they can't believe it's him. It **has** to be a ghost, because real live flesh and blood could never be calm enough or *transcendent of circumstance* enough to walk on water

But there Jesus is. And Peter, bold, impetuous Peter, is the one who says, "Okay, if it **is** you, if it is you, bid me come to you. Let me walk on the water to you." When Jesus does, he gets out of the boat and he does just fine for the first several steps. It is only when Peter begins to pay more attention to his *circumstances* than the One who has called him that he begins to sink. Did you get that? Only when Peter pays more attention to the circumstances than to the One who has called him does he begin to sink.

The edgy hipster pastor Rob Bell says in a video we used to show the confirmation class for years says that Peter's problem, and the reason that he begins to sink, isn't a lack of faith in Jesus. It's a lack of faith in himself as a child of God. He loses confidence in his ability to do what Jesus asks him to do.

There's something to be said for that particular take. We CAN lose confidence in our ability to do what Jesus calls us to do. Communities and individuals of faith do that all the time. We pay so much attention to the winds of culture and the waves of circumstance and challenge that we forget what we have been called to be and to do. We forget our own identity, our own resources, our own ability to respond.

I like that take. But the problem I have with Bell's approach is that too often, I think, especially in a society like ours which discourages vulnerability and open sharing, too often, we can believe that we have to go it on our own. After all, we're children of God, why can't we walk on water?

Over Labor Day weekend, Judith and I went down to Asheville for a wedding that she conducted. Weddings can be a little tricky for those of us in recovery, so I made it a priority to go to a few 12 step meetings while I was there. I'll never forget what I heard a guy share at a meeting on the morning of the wedding. He said, "There are three words that I say, that whenever I say them, lead to trouble. The three words are: *I've got this*. Whenever I say, "I've got this." I can be sure that I'll eventually be saying, "Oh No." He was a little more colorful than that, but you get the point. What he was trying to say, I think, is that all of us need to know that we are not alone. Sure it makes sense from time to time to say, "I've got this. This test that's coming up, I've got it. This test that's coming up, I've got it. That's a natural instinct. But there are times when I've got this will lead us into trouble. Because each and every one of us needs the help of God and other people to make it in this

world. When we forget that, then Oh No is on its way. We need to be willing to say that we need help, from God and from one another as God's agents, and then reach out for it. That's what helps us do what may seem to be impossible.

I don't know about you, but I don't know anyone in my life who has literally walked on water—I've known some people who think they can—but I do know all sorts of people who manage to do something that I consider to be even more impressive day in and day out. They transcend their circumstances and they do it by paying more attention to the love of the One who has called them than to what would cause them to sink.

On the front of your bulletin there is a marvelous quote from Madeline L'Engle's book *Walking on Water*. She quotes a Cardinal, Cardinal Suhard, who says, "To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda, nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist."

I know people like that. I know people like that.

There are people who do things that I consider to be even harder than walking on water.

Like aging with grace and dignity. Waking up in the morning and fumbling with the buttons as they take an hour or more to get dressed. Dealing with frustration day in and day out, and somehow, way more often than not, meeting life with a smile and treating others with grace.

That is way more valuable than walking on water. It's a far bigger testament to the power of God's Spirit in a person's life. The only reason people can do that is because they trust in a God who is greater than circumstances. They do it with God's help. They do it by trusting in God.

What about people who forgive things that really seem to be almost unforgivable? You know, people who have been not just hurt a little bit—that happens to all of us—but hurt a lot. We're not talking about somebody stepping on their toes. I was looking at an old sermon from 2007 the other day—or maybe it was earlier than 2007. Reading about the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Remember that? A guy came into a schoolhouse and shot their children and the community reached out in forgiveness and grace. It would seem to me to be impossible for me to forgive something like that if it happened to me or my loved ones.

The ability to forgive something like that doesn't make sense without the existence of God.

What about people who get up each day and somehow move through grief—the loss of something or someone they thought they could never ever live without? Yet somehow they get up each morning and they step out into the day. It hurts. But they take a step and another step and another step. They're not walking on water, but they are living, living into a future they would not have chosen. You wonder how they could ever manage that without the help of God. They do it because they trust in God.

What about people who pray and pray and pray but don't get the answer to prayer that they want? The answer to their prayer is No, or Not yet anyway, but somehow they are able to move forward in acceptance, accepting that it is what it is, but God can work with what is.

All of these people are doing something more amazing to me than walking on water. They are living in such a way that their life and their actions wouldn't make sense if God did not exist.

Here's another thing. A lot of you are these people. In Jesus' name. Amen.