

Genesis 1:1-10 & Psalm 93

Matthew 14:22-33

August 13, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

RISKING THE DRENCHING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Lake Susan is located in the middle of the town of Montreat and at the heart of the Montreat Conference Center. Assembly Inn overlooks the lake on the left. Anderson Auditorium sits to the right. The Huckleberry Cafe, the Montreat Store, and the 10,000 Villages Shop are next to the spillway. The Friday night closing worship service of the Montreat Youth Conference began at 9:00 p.m. in Anderson Auditorium. Following the sermon, 400+ senior high youth and adult advisors processed outside and ringed Lake Susan for a candlelight commissioning service.

In 1916, the old wooden dam was swept away in a flood. A new stone dam was built in 1924 with funds donated by Susan Graham and her son, Allen. Lake Susan was named in her honor. Today you can ride around the lake in a paddle boat or canoe and observe the two beautiful swans that swim gracefully in the water. You can fish in Lake Susan, but there are signs prominently displayed that say “No fishing from the dam.” There are also signs that say “No swimming in the lake.” Fred Burroughs told me that when he went to Montreat back in the day, there was a sign on Lake Susan that said “Please don’t walk on the water!”

Fred’s story reminded me of the time a Catholic priest and a Presbyterian minister invited the new Baptist preacher to go fishing with them. They rowed out to the middle of a cove and dropped their lines in the water. When it got to be lunchtime, the priest looked around and said, “I left my lunch on the bank. I’ll be right back.” The priest climbed out of the boat, walked right across the water, grabbed his lunch, walked back across the water, and climbed back into the boat. Then the Presbyterian minister said, “I left the cooler on the bank. I’ll be right back.” He climbed out of the boat, walked right across the water, grabbed the cooler, walked back across the water, and climbed back into the boat. The new Baptist preacher was dumbfounded. He thought to himself, “If they can walk on water, I can, too!” He said, “It’s hot out here. I left my hat on the bank. I’ll be right back.” He climbed out of the boat and promptly fell into the water. The Catholic priest looked at the Presbyterian minister and said, “I reckon we ought to tell him where the stumps are.”

They say “Truth is stranger than fiction.” Consider these two stories:

In 1999, as Israel anticipated a huge wave of tourists and pilgrims in the year 2000, the National Parks Authority authorized a company’s plans to build a submerged bridge in the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum, the traditional site of Jesus and Peter walking on water. The bridge was to be 13 feet wide and 28 feet long, under two inches of water. As many as 50 people could stand on the bridge at once. Developers decided

not to install handrails so pilgrims would have a more authentic experience of walking on water, although there were lifeguards on duty. [I could not find any information about whether or not this bridge still exists. My guess is, somebody made some money in 2000 and abandoned the project shortly thereafter.]¹

Then there is the Walk on Water Kayak company, which promises “Adventure and Luxury on the Sea of Galilee.” You can choose from four different tours: Paddling with the Apostles; Paddling on Heaven’s Water; Paddling with Mary Magdelana and the Fishermen; or the Sea of Galilee 6-Day Grand Tour.²

All humor aside, this story about Jesus walking on water is awe-inspiring, and maybe not for the reason you might think. As with many of Jesus’ miraculous acts, people have tried to explain how he could have walked on water. About a dozen years ago, an article was published in the Journal of Paleolimnology in which the authors argued that Jesus may actually have been floating on a thin layer of ice that had formed due to a unique combination of weather conditions on the Sea of Galilee. The study said, “the unusual local freezing process might have provided an origin to the story that Christ walked on water. Since the spring ice is relatively small, a person standing or walking on it may appear to an observer situated some distance away to be ‘walking on water.’” The article’s authors said, “Whether this happened or not is an issue for religious scholars, archaeologists, anthropologists and believers to decide on.”³

Believers then and now have decided, and the consensus is Jesus is Lord! Old Testament images are the backdrop for this compelling story:

* “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2)

* “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.” (Psalm 69:1-2)

* “The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. More majestic than the thunders of the mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord!” (Psalm 93:3-4)

* “[God] alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea.” (Job 9:8)

* “I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me . . . Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.” (Psalm 77:1, 19)

This story is not to be confused with the other story in Matthew’s gospel when Jesus stills the storm (Matthew 8:23-27). In that story, Jesus is asleep in the boat with his disciples when the windstorm arose and the waves swamped the boat. It is true that, in today’s story, the wind ceased when Jesus and Peter got into the boat. But the wind was still against Peter and the waves were still battering him, along with the disciples in the boat, when Peter said, “Lord, since it is you, command me to come to you on the water,” and Jesus said, “Come.”

Several years ago, the Alternative Sunday School Class studied John Ortberg's book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. In his preface, Rev. Ortberg writes, "[Peter's walk] is unforgettable not so much because of where he was walking as what he was walking **on** and who he was walking **with**. . . Let Peter's walk stand as an invitation to everyone who, like him, wants to step out in faith, who wants to experience something more of the power and presence of God. Let water-walking be a picture of doing with God's help what I could never do on my own."⁴

On Saturday, July 8, an amazing thing happened at Panama City Beach, Florida. Perhaps you saw it on the news. Nine members of a family, including two children and an elderly woman, were swept out in the ocean by a rip current. The mom, Roberta Ursery, realized she couldn't see her 8 and 11 year old sons. Then she heard them screaming and crying for help. She and other family members hurried out to help them, but were overcome by the current.

People stood on the beach, unsure of what to do because of the force of the waves. Police and rescue personnel arrived. One police officer started swimming toward the family but couldn't make it. The rescue boat hadn't arrived yet. Then a remarkable thing happened. 70-80 strangers formed a human chain and reached out to the family with boogie boards and surfboards. Once the family had been pulled back to the beach, Roberta Ursery told a reporter from WJHG, "As a mama, I'm supposed to be able to protect them and do everything, and I couldn't do it that day. I had to have help, which I was eternally grateful for that."⁵

Peter had to have help in the midst of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, and he must have been eternally grateful for that. To his credit, Peter knew he had to have help to do what he did — "Lord, since it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Also to his credit, when he took his eye off of Jesus and began to sink, Peter once again knew he had to have help — "Lord, save me!" Notice that Jesus comes to Peter's aid both times. Notice, also, that Jesus doesn't tell Peter to stay in the boat, where it was relatively safer than walking out on the waves. Jesus doesn't say, "Stay put, Peter! I'll be there in a minute. I'll come to you." Instead, what he says is, "Courage. It is I. Don't be afraid. Come."

How often we are like Peter, in our own faith and in the church. We want to go where Jesus is, but we take our eye off of Jesus and start fearing the power of the wind and the waves more than we trust the promise of Jesus. Remember, when Matthew wrote his gospel, it was about 50 years after Jesus had died and been raised from the dead. Matthew wasn't writing an objective account of historical events. He was writing a gospel to proclaim the good news and the call of Jesus in believers' lives. Jesus' call sounds down through the centuries and in the midst of the wind and waves of our lives today, and we hear him say, "Don't be afraid. Come."

When I mused in Bible study, "Why in the world would Peter want to get out of the boat in the midst of a storm like that?" Nancy said, "I think he wanted to be with Jesus." I think she's exactly right. Peter wasn't trying to be something he wasn't. That's why he twice asked for Jesus' help. As someone has said, Peter wasn't trying to be **like** Jesus, he was trying to be **with** Jesus.

Today's sermon title — "Risking the Drenching" — is taken from a writing by Jan Richardson called "Blessing that Bears the Wind, the Waves." Her thoughts get at the heart of this story about Peter and Jesus out there on the water, and about what this story means for your faith and mine and for our church:

*That we will risk
the drenching
by which we
are drawn
toward the voice
that calls us,
the love
that catches us,
the faith
that carries us
beyond the wind,
the wave.*

I asked "Why in the world would Peter want to get out of the boat in the midst of a storm like that?" Considering Jesus' promise, assurance, and call — "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. Come," it might be more honest to ask, "Why in the world do we not want to get out of the boat and walk toward Jesus and be with him?" Jan Richardson has written another poem called "Blessing on the Waves" which expands this idea of "risking the drenching."

*I cannot promise
that this blessing
will keep you afloat
as if by lashing these words
to your arms,
your ankles,
you could stop yourself
from going under.*

*The most this blessing
can do, perhaps,
is to stand beside you
in the boat,*

*place its hand
in the small of your back,
and push.*

*Be assured that
though this blessing
is eager to set you
in motion,
it will not
leave you forsaken,
will not compel you
to leap
where it has not already
stepped out.*

*These words
will go with you
across the waves.
These words
will accompany you
across the waters.*

*And if you
find yourself
flailing,
this blessing
will breathe itself
into you,
will breathe itself
through you*

*until you are
borne up
by the hands
that reach toward you,
the voice that
calls your name.⁶*

The boat is an ancient symbol for Christ's church. The boat is often shown being rocked by the storms and waves of life. But a boat is meant to go somewhere, not to sit dead in the water. And then there is the matter of getting out of the boat if we want to

walk on the water — not to be *like* Jesus, but to be *with* Jesus, to respond to his call, “Come!” It means running the risk of getting drenched, but Jesus’ promise comes to us as his voice cuts through the storms of our lives and we see his hand reaching out to grab us — “Come!”

Look at the picture in the upper left hand corner on the front of the bulletin.



This is a short version of the longer Breton fisherman’s prayer. Admiral Hyman Rickover, the director of the U.S. Navy’s nuclear fleet and Naval Reactors in the 20th century, gave a plaque like this to each new submarine captain. He also gave one to President John F. Kennedy, who used the words in his remarks at the dedication of the East Coast Memorial to the Missing at Sea on May 23, 1963. JFK kept the plaque on his desk in the Oval Office.

I found several different versions of the Breton fisherman’s prayer, all of which contrast our human frailty with God’s sovereign love and power. Although the prayer contrasts the smallness of our boat with the greatness of God’s sea, the sentiment of the prayer applies to this story about Peter walking on water to be with Jesus. It could have been on Peter’s lips when he stepped out of the boat on the Sea of Galilee. It can be on our lips and in our hearts when we step out in faith to be with Jesus who calls us and says, “Don’t be afraid! Come!”

*Thy sea, O God, so great,
My boat so small.
It cannot be that any happy fate,
Will me befall,
Save as Thy goodness opens paths for me,
Through the consuming vastness of the sea.*

*Thy winds, O God, so strong,
So slight my sail.
How could I curb and bit them on the long
and salty trail,
Unless Thy love were mightier than the wrath
Of all the tempests that beset my path?*

*Thy world, O God, so fierce,
And I so frail.
Yet, though its arrows threaten oft to pierce
My fragile mail,
Cities of refuge rise where dangers cease,
Sweet silences abound,
and all is peace.*

Let us pray: Lord, we come to you seeking your healing and restoring love. Give us courage to reach out to you in the good and easy times as well as in the times of strain and stress. Open our hearts to receive your message of peace and hope. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

NOTES

¹ "Walking on Water," at www.jerusalem-tours.com.

² www.walkonwaterkayak.com

³ Julian Borger, "Jesus was walking on thin ice, claim scientists," April 5, 2006 at www.theguardian.com.

⁴ John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 9.

⁵ Artemis Moshtaghian and Nancy Coleman, "Beachgoers form a human chain to save a family trapped in a rip current," July 12, 2017 at www.cnn.com.

⁶ Both poems are by Jan Richardson and can be found on her blog, "The Painted Prayerbook," at www.paintedprayerbook.com.