

“COME ON OUT – THE WATER’S FINE!”

Matthew 14:22-33

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

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This morning I want to give you a nostalgic taste of the old normal. I’m going to share a cartoon strip from the funny pages! I’ve done this on countless occasions in the sanctuary. It will seem like old times while we’re worshipping out here on the Green!

In last Thursday’s installment of “The Family Circus,” little Dolly is playing in the shallow water of a lake. She calls out to her mother, who is standing on the shore: “Come on in, Mommy, the water’s fine!” The hitch is that Dolly is not really in the water; she’s straddling the shoulders of her father, who is the one actually standing ankle deep in the lake. For Dolly to really know whether the water is “fine,” she would have to get her own feet wet.

Over the past few days, two events have transpired which demonstrate that the water is not always fine. A week ago yesterday, a 30-year old man jumped off a bridge on Lake Zoar in Southbury. The bridge is a popular destination for thrill-seekers who love to take the plunge into the shallow waters at that spot. One can almost hear them calling out to this young man from below, “Come on in, the water’s fine!” Well, the man jumped into the water, never resurfaced, and was pronounced dead at the scene. The water that seemed to be so inviting, to offer so much fun, proved to be fatal.

And then, last Tuesday, a tropical storm came roaring through Connecticut with torrential rains and high winds, leaving 800,000 residents without electricity. A man in nearby Naugatuck was killed when he was struck by a falling tree. We were reminded that when water and wind are combined, the results can be deadly, not delightful.

Our Christian New Testament was written nearly 2000 years ago, but it is still a “good read” because it is so relatable. You and I can identify with the biblical characters, the situations they face, and how they cope with those situations. Isn’t it remarkable that on the Sunday after a tropical storm wreaked havoc in our state, the Gospel lesson from the lectionary is about the disciples trying to survive a terrible storm and Jesus eventually stilling the storm? You and I normally relate to this story metaphorically; we speak of the “storms of life,” and we’ve had plenty of them lately in the form of a global pandemic and a period of social unrest. But last Tuesday we were hit by an actual, physical storm, and we were left just as powerless as the disciples.

There is another miracle story similar to this one which appears earlier in Matthew and also in Mark and Luke. In that account, Jesus is in the boat with the disciples when the wind and the waves threaten their lives. The problem is, Jesus is asleep, seemingly oblivious to the danger they are facing, and has to be awakened before he stills the storm. The story in Matthew 14 has the same happy ending, but it starts and proceeds differently. Here, Jesus is not in the boat but on dry land. When he hears the disciples’ distress, he walks across the water to get to their boat and bring the storm under control. This new element – Jesus walking on water – is what makes this miracle story unique and draws us into the action. For it is not just that Jesus walks on water; he also calls Peter – and by implication us – to walk on water too.

In this episode, Peter is a curious confusion of eager trust and paralyzing fear. His words and actions are so relatable, so easy for us to identify with, that I am tempted as a preacher to focus my sermon on him – you know, urging you to be more like Peter in his faith, or less like Peter in his failure to keep his eyes on Jesus. But to do so would be to risk distorting the point of the story. A major concern of this episode is a continuing concern throughout Matthew’s Gospel: Who is Jesus? How does one recognize his true identity? What kind of Messiah is he?

Again, these questions are relatable to us. You and I have read and heard about Jesus all our lives, but we’ve never actually seen him. Who is Jesus? What does he look like? If we met him on the street or in a moment of crisis, would we know him? We have no photographs of his physical appearance. The beloved *Head of Christ* by Warner Sallman is only a fanciful representation of one painter for how Jesus might have looked. But how does he really look?

In today’s Scripture, a group of Jesus’s own disciples have difficulty recognizing him. They don’t know that the figure who walks along the roaring waves is none other than their Master. The disciples are in a boat, fighting a strong headwind, driving them far out to sea. At early dawn, they see a terrifying sight: a figure walks toward them on the surface of the water. “It’s a ghost,” they exclaim with one voice (Matthew 14:26). Then Jesus speaks to them: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (v. 27). But even when Jesus speaks to them, they still are not sure if he is who he says he is. For it is then that Peter makes a strange request: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (v. 28).

Don’t you find that strange? “Lord, if it is you, command me to risk my life, to tempt death, and walk out across six thousand fathoms of dark, threatening sea.” “Lord, if it is you, command me to stick my hand into the fire.” “Lord, if it is you, order me to jump off a skyscraper.” If it is you.

Don’t you find it strange that Peter is uncertain that the voice from the waves is the voice of Jesus until, unless, that voice commands him, “Come on out, the water’s fine!”? Notice that Jesus’ command is to come on out, not to come on in. Jesus isn’t inviting Peter to swim in the water; he’s inviting Peter to walk on the water.

Bishop Will Willimon tells about a friend he had in college – a friend that his mother didn’t approve of for all the reasons that Willimon liked him. He thought this young man was one of the most interesting, adventurous, maybe reckless people he’d ever met. Perhaps this is just the sort of person a boy at nineteen is drawn to and whom parents at fifty find disturbing. Without describing his physical appearance, Willimon tells us how you would know his young friend if you met him in a crowd. He’s the one who would be the first to nudge you in the side with his elbow and whisper in your ear things like, “Come on, drink this, you’ll love it!” You might ask, “What is that?” And he would reply, “Don’t worry. Trust me. Drink it!” Or, “Let’s see how fast this baby will go. Put the pedal to the metal; let’s see if she’ll break a hundred!” Or, “I’ll go skydiving if you will. We’ll free-fall for several thousand feet, then the parachute will bring us gently back to earth. It’ll be fun!” That’s how you would know him.

And that’s how you will know Jesus. Jesus is the one who extravagantly, recklessly commands you to leave the safety of the boat, step into the sea, and test the waters to show what your faith is made of. You know the words to the old gospel song: “Softly and tenderly, Jesus is

calling, calling for you and for me.” Yes, softly and tenderly Jesus is calling – calling you to risk your life, throw caution to the wind, step out of the boat and defy death!

The Gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus calling a group of ordinary people to drop their fishing nets, leave their families, and venture forth with him on a perilous sea called discipleship. Why then should we find it strange for one of those people now to say, “Lord, if it is you, call me to get out of the boat and walk on the waves”?

“Jesus calls us o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea . . . in our joys and in our sorrows . . . saying ‘Christian, follow me.’” That’s how another hymn puts it. But in today’s story, Jesus doesn’t simply call us o’er the tumult. Jesus doesn’t call us out of the tumult. Jesus calls us into the tumult. Jesus calls Peter out of the boat and onto the waves; and on the basis of his past experience with Jesus, Peter recognizes Jesus for who he is.

I read about a woman who runs a home for young mothers who have nowhere to go to care for their children; they have no husbands and no family to step up and help them. The hours are long, the work is hard, and there is never enough money. That woman’s father happens to be one of the richest and most successful men in their state. He left her comfortably fixed in life. Now, why would she, at middle age, get mixed up in a ministry like this home for unwed mothers? Who would have commanded her to do such a thing? I think you know who.

In Matthew’s story, the good news is that when Peter ventures forth, even though the going is rough, even though he almost sinks and perishes, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him, just at the right moment. He helps Peter back into the boat, he stills the wind and the waves, and Peter is saved. But if Peter does not venture forth in the first place, if he does not obey the call to walk on the water, how small and shallow his life would be.

I wonder if many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test our faith. This story implies that if we want to be close to Jesus, we’ve got to leave the boat and launch out onto the sea; we’ve got to prove his promises by trusting his promises, through risk and venture.

I read about a young man who, after graduating from college, gave three years of his life to an organization called “Teach For America.” They put him, an honor graduate of a great university, in one of the smallest, and certainly one of the poorest little towns in the state of Mississippi. There he was paid just barely enough to live on. What made him do it? What force drove him to this countercultural posture of giving to others rather than taking all he could get?

He tells us in his own words: “Something, it’s hard to say what, just made me think that this was what I ought to do. I felt a sense that I had a responsibility to give back to the community. So much had been given to me. I thought that I had a kind of obligation to reach out to the needs of others, to experience firsthand what it’s like to be with the poor. Something just made me want to do this.”

Perhaps it’s more accurate to say that someone made him want to do this. Someone – one whom he may not even know that well, one for whom he may not yet have a name – had beckoned him to step out of the boat, to risk walking on water, to defy the forces of nature, to venture out into the storm, to swim against the stream, to come closer to him. I think you know who.

So if in the dead of night, or maybe near dawn, you should hear a voice calling your name, an unidentified voice calling you to rise up, to sail forth, to risk the storm, to defy the waves, there is a good chance that voice could belong to none other than our Lord and Savior. Who would dare to call an ordinary person like you or me, with our mixture of faith and fear, to such a high adventure, to such risk and struggle? I think you know who.