

"WALKING ON WATER"

A Sermon By

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"WALKING ON WATER"

TEXT: "And in the fourth watch of the night, He came to them...walking on the sea."

(Matthew 14: 25)

INTRODUCTION This story of Jesus walking on the water is a beautiful, but somewhat bewildering story. What are we to make of it? Why is it there, anyway?

As you know, it's often been the source of some bad jokes about Baptist, Presbyterian and Methodist preachers in a boat out on a lake fishing. For some reason they have to return to shore, having forgotten something...their lunch perhaps or maybe some fishing tackle. The Baptist and the Presbyterian manage to get back safely to the shore...walking across the water...and the Methodist, of course, sinks. It's a bad joke. When they finally rescue the Methodist preacher, the Baptist and the Presbyterian tell him where the rocks are.

They say down in Alabama that the late Bear Bryant walked on water. Someone mentioned last week when the tributes were being offered about the time they saw Bear Bryant using a cane. They said that he had been hit by a motor boat while out for his morning walk. That was the person's way of saying that Bear Bryant was something special...almost superhuman...regarded with more than just respect. He was regarded with great reverence.

DEVELOPMENT One begins to wonder. Why was this story in the Gospels? Was it included to remind us that Jesus was like a God? That He was not really human and not subject to the same human conditions you and I are subject to? Is this a "divinity" story? Is it there to convince the reader that Jesus was superhuman?

I don't think so. In the first place, it never convinced anybody of His divinity who didn't already believe it. And secondly, this story is not really about Jesus...if you read it carefully. As you do, you'll see that it's about Peter and the disciples, and therefore you can stretch things and say that it's also about you and me. It's not a "divinity" story, so much as it is a "church" story. Let me explain.

When you look at it that way you notice that other things just seem to fall into place. The early Church, for instance, used the ship as the symbol of the Church; we know that. And architecturally that is still the case. The space in which you are sitting in the sanctuary is called the "nave" of the Church. Nave is a Latin word which means "ship" - so the Church sit in the ship. The Church, they said, is like a ship adrift on a stormy sea. That's what life was like for them in the early centuries. In the words of our scripture lesson, "they were battered by the waves."

The waves beat against that boat, and the wind comes out of the East and goes right through a man's clothing and chills his bones and the disciples are frightened. They think they're going to sink.

THE NEEDS OF THE CHURCH And then you notice if you read this 14th chapter of Matthew all the way through, that the story preceding this story of the disciples in the boat is the story of Jesus feeding

the multitudes and it's followed by the account of his healing many of the sick. So in between these two accounts of Jesus meeting the needs of people is this jewel of a story of Jesus meeting the needs of the Church. Which is to point out that church people have needs just like everybody else. They get scared in the storms of life; they're apt to panic just like others. Church people know what that "sinking" feeling is all about. Yes, people like ourselves need to be saved; we have needs to be met and ministered to.

Occasionally I meet people who assume that "being Christian" sets them apart from all the human struggles. They assume that if you're a solid Christian you're at ease all the time, that you have "peace of mind" and inner calm. I know Christians who experience feelings that they don't think they're supposed to have as Christians. It doesn't fit their model of what it means to be a Christian. They think they're supposed to face everything with equanimity, always to "be strong in the Lord" and sometimes they feel a bit guilty about feeling scared or angry or depressed or tempted...and they wonder if they've been hypocrites all of those years feeling that way.

THIS STORY IS FOR YOU

What is it they say on television after a home run. This "Bud's for YOU!" Well, I'm saying "This story's for YOU". Yes, it's a "church" story and it's saying "look...church people have needs no different than the multitudes whom He healed and whom He fed." They both had needs. And so do you. Remember, He came according to their needs. And he'll do that for you, too..."according to your needs". We may not all be in the same boat, but we're all adrift on the same sea.

Here's a way to interpret this story. Up in Boston, in the Gardner Museum, there hangs Rembrandt's painting entitled, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee". It's a depiction of another version of this story, the one in chapter eight of Matthew. In the 14th chapter, our text today, Jesus is on the shore and He bids Peter to come and to walk to Him. But in Matthew, chapter eight, Jesus is in the boat with the disciples. Now that means that there are twelve disciples and one Jesus in the boat. That adds up to 13. Even two thousand years ago that added up to 13. But as you look at that painting carefully you notice that there are 14 people in the boat. Not 13, but 14. What's the story...the reason, the explanation?

You look carefully and try to pick out the disciples. Now here's Peter. That's got to be Peter. This one looks like John must have looked. And this one over here with a question mark written across his face, well that's got to be Thomas. Hey, wait a minute, who's this little guy over here? He looks familiar. His face, though, is contorted in fear and anxiety. He's clasped his hands against his cheeks, obviously scared. And if you don't recognize who it is, some guard or museum guide will tell you that that's Rembrandt's face there. In other words, Rembrandt painted himself into the picture. He was saying that he belonged in the same boat as the disciples. And so do you and so do it.

This story is not about Jesus walking on the water. This story is about the Church riding out the storms. And the message is quite simple. The message is: if you keep your eye on Jesus you won't sink. That's it. Let me repeat it for the hard of hearing and the faint of heart: if you keep your eye on Jesus you won't sink.

"And in the fourth watch of the night, he came to them...
walking on the sea."

HE CAME TO THEM In the fourth watch of the night - that is to say about 3 am.... that's when it's the darkest...He came to them. That is to He's in control. He's the Lord of the storms of this life. And He said, "Take heed...it is I...have no fear." It's going to be rough, but you're going to make it.

Peter answered Him, "Lord, if it is You...bid me to come to you on the sea." "Come on Peter...face the storm" And Peter did it. He got out of the boat, kept his eye on Jesus and walked toward Him. Until the wind roared, and then in fear, he turned to the wind. And you know what happened? He sank. Jesus caught him and said:

"O man of little faith, I told you to keep your eye on Me. You should have trusted Me, and then you wouldn't have sunk...."

Well, that's the simple message of this marvellous passage. Keep your eye on Jesus and you won't sink. You see Jesus is evidence that God is on our side, that we're the home team, that we have the distinct advantage of playing our lives on His court. As that hymn puts it, "This is My Father's world, He shines in all that's fair. This is My father's world: why should my heart be sad?" Or anxious, or frightened, or fearful? That's the message of the Bible. God created this place and as His children, we enjoy the "home court" advantage. Paul says this more clearly than anybody else. In that famous 8th chapter of his Letter to the Romans he practically sings it:

"If God be for us, who then can be against us? For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor powers, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor heights, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which we saw in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's one of the greatest texts in the Bible. It reads like a coach's "pep talk" to the team before the biggest game of the season. "If God be for us who then can be against us?"

"The Lord will keep you" said the Psalmist. So keep on going. "God so loved the world that He sent His Son" - to tell you we're not going to perish. "So come on Peter, face the storm" - and walk. And Peter walked with his eyes on Jesus, but then he looked at the wind and sank. "Peter...why didn't you trust me?" I am the Lord - not just of the halcyon days, but even in the holocaust days of life!

ELEMENT OF RISK That's the message of this story that's for you and you. And then this detail which we can't escape or overlook - the element of risk. Peter, you noticed, had to get out of that boat and walk. And Kierkegaard use to say, "And he had to walk over 70,000 fathoms". And therein is the test of great faith - the ability to get out of the boat that you're in and to walk, to take the risk, to take that little "leap of faith". I need to hear that and you do too - to hear that a fulfilled life is a life that always involves risk. You can't escape it. A fulfilled life always involves risk.

Someone sent me something in the mail some time ago...something like a poem. I confess to you I put it in my file and I can't remember who it was who sent it. I want to say "thank you" to you who sent it and give you credit...whoever you are. I liked it and I'm going to use it today.

"To express your independence is to risk losing your friends.
To trust others is to risk being taken advantage of.
To make a decision is to risk making a mistake.
To make a mistake is to risk losing the respect of others.
To reach out to others is to risk involvement.
To show feelings is to risk exposing your true self.
To love is to risk not being loved in return.
To live is to risk dying.
To hope is to risk despair.
To try is to risk failure."

Isn't that excellent. It's saying something we all need to hear...something we're tempted to forget: you can't do anything worthwhile in this life without taking risks. In other words, you can't do anything until you get out of the boat.

AND THIS TOO Herbert Otto talks about what he called the "Grandma Moses" effect. He points to retired people who continue to grow and to expand their lives after their retirement. Instead of that time being the fading of life, it turns out to be the flowering of their life. And he asks the questions: "Why is it that other people wither on the vine? Why is it that other people don't seem to reach the full potential of their life?"

He said that it's due first to negative conditioning. And that rises partly out of our educational system where we learn by having mistakes pointed out to us over and over again. He said it also comes from a society where the news media focuses on bad news. The result is that you perceive the world outside as being a threat, and you see yourself as being insignificant and ineffective in doing anything about it. So you reason - the best thing is to pull in...to stay in the boat. The best thing is not to take any risks.

And even some religion gives you that message. A lot of religion is negative conditioning. It focuses on human beings as sinners, not children of God. We are sinners, but the essence of all of our lives - the way God created us - is that we are children of God. They focus on the evil of the world. They say it's going to hell. It belongs to the devil, so withdraw from it. But that's to withdraw from the gift that God is giving us.

God gave us this creation to enjoy. We are supposed to affirm ourselves and each other and enjoy the Creation. The point of the Bible is, "This is God's world". Nobody else's. God's world. Enjoy it. Trust it. "Come on Peter, you can make it. Get out of that boat. Keep your eyes on Me as you walk across the water."

Richard Niebuhr put it all in a classic phrases which I leave with you. He said:

"The essence of Christian faith is trust and loyalty in a God who is trustworthy and loyal."

So friend - get out of that boat. Try walking on the water. It will hold you. Try it today, remembering that today is the first day of the rest of your life!

PRAYER

Draw us to Yourself, O God, as we find You revealed to us in the life of Your Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

As we pause to think about Him and to enter into the spirit of His life, may something of His life enter into ours.

That we may be steadied in moments of despair and discouragement.

That we may never stagger no matter how uneven the motion of the world around us.

That we may go our way never complaining about the weather we meet or the things that befall us.

That we may be strong in moments of temptation, in times of tension and stress.

May these moments this hour spent in Your presence nourish our lives that we may depart with a deeper and stronger faith in You, remembering that this is your world.

Prepare us for a meaningful Lent. All of this in the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.