

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14A) August 7, 2011  
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

1 Kings 19:9-18  
 Psalm 85:8-13

Romans 10:5-15  
 Matthew 14:22-33

## Walking on Water

Among the items that sometimes circulate on the Internet are bloopers from parish bulletins -- you know, those odd juxtapositions or quirky phrases that are inadvertently funny. Here is one. Title of Sunday morning sermon: "Jesus walks on water." Title of Sunday evening program: "Searching for Jesus."

We grin because it's so reasonable. If someone strode down a beach, waded into the surf, and tried to walk along the surface of the sea, you and I would dismiss the person as delusional. It would be absurd: you can't do it; you can't violate the laws of physics like that. Yet here we have a story in which not only Jesus walks on the water, but also -- if briefly -- his disciple Peter, as well. What do we make of it? What is this story about?

Jesus has just finished feeding the five thousand, which is the Gospel story that we heard last week. Now he puts the disciples into the boat and tells them to go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, while he dismisses the crowds and goes up the mountain by himself to pray. This seems to have been characteristic of Jesus: he regularly withdrew from the circle of disciples and from his ministry to the crowds to take time alone in silent prayer, listening (as I imagine it) to the inner voice of love, letting himself steep in the same "sound of sheer silence" that Elijah heard on the mountain-top (1 Kings 19:12) and that all of us hear when in contemplative prayer we drop below the chatty commentaries of the mind and experience the love that is always being poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5).

So Jesus is alone in prayer as evening comes, and in the meantime the disciples are becoming increasingly frightened, for their boat, "battered by the waves," is still "far from the land," with the wind blowing hard against them (Matthew 14:14). The sea in this story -- as in many parts of the Bible -- is a symbol of chaos (c.f. Genesis 1:1; Jonah 1:4-16), and it is easy to imagine ourselves thrown into that little boat with the disciples, clinging to the gunwales for dear life. Who in this room doesn't know what it's like to feel overwhelmed? We've all had times of being caught up in waves -- waves of trouble, waves of danger. The stock market plunging; a helicopter going down in Afghanistan; extreme weather events pointing to an unstable climate -- pick

your peril, there is plenty to go around. Some hazards are close to home. Last night, just as I was writing these words, my husband and I discovered that while we were out, a burglar had thrown a rock through a first-floor window of our house and had ransacked my mother's apartment. Turbulence is around us -- there's no question about that. And turbulence may be inside us, too, bringing on waves of uneasiness and fear. No wonder we often feel swamped.

And then, early in the morning, sometime after 3 a.m., the disciples looked out into the darkness, and through the spray and surging water, they spotted something approaching them, walking on the sea. What could it be? Was it a ghost? "And they cried out in fear" (Matthew 14:26). But no -- it was Jesus himself, who immediately spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (Matthew 14:27). "It is I" -- or, literally "I am": this is the very name of God, the name of the One who is the source of light and life, the very Ground of Being. "I am" is approaching; he is here; he is speaking to us. "Take heart," he says. "Do not be afraid."

Right in the middle of the whirlwind of our lives, right when we're awash with worry and anxiety, our jaw clenched tight, and all our energy applied to the desperate attempt to keep ourselves afloat -- we hear a calm, clear voice within us saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." We may be struggling with our selves. We may be struggling with our circumstances, struggling with sorrows and temptations, with regrets and fears, but then that voice sounds within us, the voice of Jesus, calling us to take heart. "Do not be afraid."

You might think that this would be the end of the story, this story of Jesus calming the troubled waters of fear and anxiety that so often dominate our lives, but of course there is more. Peter, dear Peter -- you can always count on him to be impetuous and impulsive, he is such an ardent soul! "Lord," he says boldly, "if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "Come" (Matthew 14:28-29).

And out Peter steps -- out of the security of the boat, out of that small world where everyone is narrowly focused on staying alive -- and he walks toward Jesus across the open waves. Apparently it's not enough for Peter to experience the inward calm that Jesus gives, not enough for him to know that he is safe, not enough for him to experience the relief of understanding that the Lord of life is with him and will guide his boat safely to shore. No, Peter's love for Jesus is too strong and too personal for that. He wants to meet Jesus where Jesus is -- out in the turbulence of the world. He wants to do what Jesus does -- to proclaim and bear witness to the love and mercy of God. He wants to follow where Jesus leads -- to risk all, to venture all, to make his life not a concerted effort to stay cautious and safe, but rather a grand adventure in which moment to moment he gives himself in love, holding nothing back.

And so Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus. When have you gotten out of the boat? For I'm sure you have. We get out of the boat and walk on the water whenever we venture a brave thing in love. We get out of the boat and walk on the water whenever we care less for our own comfort and security and more for the possibility of responding to human need. We get out of the boat and walk on the water whenever we head toward Jesus, whenever we put our trust in a divine power that is greater than ourselves and turn our eyes and hands and feet toward love. I'm not talking about defying the law of gravity. I'm talking about responding to the lure of love, about staying connected with the One who calls us out beyond ourselves, beyond our own small boat, giving us courage to do more than we ever thought possible.

The only way to awaken faith is to do something that requires it. Walking on water is as good an image as any for what it is like to step out in faith, and of course we fail all the time. Like Peter, we get frightened and lose our equanimity, lose our confidence, lose heart. Or conversely, we notice what a great job we've been doing (how special we are to be walking on water! we must be hot stuff!) -- and lose our contact with love. Self-consciousness can fell us either way, whether it's caused by fear or pride, and we begin to sink. But all we need to do is what Peter did next, to exclaim, "Lord, save me" (Matthew 14:30), and immediately Jesus will reach out his hand to catch us, just as he caught Peter, chiding us in a voice that is filled with affection, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31)

When the disciples cried out in fear, "immediately" Jesus revealed his identity and spoke a word of encouragement and calm. When Peter cried out, "immediately" Jesus stretched out his arm to grasp him and to lift him from the waves. The waves of the world are perilous and real, but Jesus is close at hand, a holy, living presence ready to save.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you tossing about in stormy seas? Are you feeling frightened and alone? Do you long to feel the strong hand of Jesus lifting you out of the waves? Right now, in the silence, can you hear his calm voice saying, "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid"? Or, as you listen deeply to your life, do you hear Jesus inviting you out of your safe hiding-place and out on the water? Is he saying to you, as he said to Peter, "Come. Trust me. Don't look down. Just keep walking toward me. Love will hold you up. If you sink, I will catch you. Come."