

Proper 14

August 13, 2017

The story of Jesus walking on the water is one most everybody knows. It is part of our cultural lexicon. You hear people say things like, “That guy thinks he walks on water.” Or conversely, “She is so wonderful to everyone—I think she really walks on water!” Movies and TV shows make light of showing people walking on water (the end of the movie, “Being There” with Peter Sellers is one of the best versions of this).

To be honest, I have always struggled with the point of this story from the Gospels. I guess a big part of me and my faith is very rational, very practical. I understand and believe that life is often a mystery and that miracles, seen and unseen, are part of life. Yet there is something about this story that has always seemed almost gratuitous to me. Why is Jesus walking on water? Why have Peter walk on water? What is the point of that?

Others have asked these questions through the years. Maybe some of you have, too. In the history of biblical interpretation, there are three basic points of view:

- One view evolved in the 18th and 19th c. when rationalism and the scientific method caused mainstream biblical interpreters to acknowledge there is no way this could have happened as described. So scholars gave various natural explanations. For example, the Greek word we translate as “on” could also be translated “by;” so perhaps Jesus was simply walking alongside the lake.
- Another view is that from the beginning this was simply a myth or parable to teach a larger lesson; something like Jonah and the whale. So this is a story that teaches what the church believes about Jesus’ divinity.
- Then there is the third view-- that this literally happened. It’s like it was a documentary of the events that occurred. This was a miracle that demonstrated Jesus’ divinity, because only God could do something like walk on water.

Regardless of what we think, this story is significant. It formed how the early church understood its Lord and its mission. The same basic story is told in three of the four Gospels. It always comes after the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Each version includes many of the same details that we heard today-- Jesus dismissing the crowd and telling the disciples to go ahead of him while he goes up a mountain to be alone and pray.

One detail is found only in Matthew’s version—that Peter tried to walk on water, too. That is the part that probably troubles me the most. What was Peter thinking? Was he just being the impetuous Peter we learn of in the Gospels? Or was something else going on here? It is a good rule of Bible study to lean into those troubling places. So I did that this week. Let’s take a few minutes to lean in together.

Commonly people think of Peter's attempt to walk on the water as something good—Peter wanted to be like Jesus, do what Jesus did. That has to be good, right? If we believe that, then we interpret what happened—his sinking into the waves—as something bad due to his lack of faith. That's what Jesus said, right? But if we use that common interpretation, we can go down a rabbit hole of what this story means for us and how we live our faith.

That view is found with many TV preachers and promoters of positive thinking who sell books and tapes and dreams. You may have heard their message—“You can do anything if you believe!” That is (perhaps) a well-intended message. Dream big! If you have enough faith, you can do it! Now I believe in confidence and hope and taking positive action. But the danger of this “You can do anything if you believe!” line is this: If we assume we can do anything if we believe hard enough, then what happens when we can't? With that view, there is either something wrong with me—or with God. It can lead to depression or a crisis of faith—or both.

So is this common view right? Was it good for Peter to try to walk on water? What exactly was said between Jesus and Peter? First, Peter said to Jesus, “**If** it is you, Lord...” Does that wording sound familiar to you? During the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, the devil said to Jesus, “**If** you are the Son of God...” He said it three times. The devil was testing Jesus and his mission on earth. In this story, Peter was testing Jesus, too.

You see, Peter's lack of faith was not because he didn't believe hard enough to walk on water. That type of superhero faith is not what we need. Rather, Peter's lack of faith was due to his putting a condition on his faith in Jesus. “If it is you, Lord...” Instead of testing his Lord, Peter could have simply remained in the boat, rejoicing in wonder at Jesus' presence, comforting his companions, and giving thanks for their rescue. Those would be signs of faith!

You see, God does not expect us to be super heroes. If we think we need that type of super human faith, we can lose our way and even lose our faith. Now anyone of us may be asked to do something extraordinary at any moment. But much, much, **much** more often, we are called to do little things well, consistently over time, and with love. *That* is how we express our faith over a lifetime.

So if that interpretation is true—that the point of the story is not about having enough faith to do the unbelievable—then what IS the point of this story? Whether as a parable or as a recollection, there is one simple interpretation of Jesus walking on water—he is God. In the Hebrew Bible and other ancient religious literature, only God can walk on water. In fact, Jesus used the Hebrew name of God for himself in the story—what we heard as, “Take heart, it is I”—can also be translated “Take heart, I AM,” the holy name for God in Hebrew. This story is about Jesus and his divine presence with us even when we feel lost and scared.

Peter's attempt to do what Jesus did—walk on water—is an example of how we can test God, especially when we are afraid: “If you are the Son of God...” “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Peter's water walk wasn't Jesus' idea. Jesus did not set it up as a test of faith for Peter, like a Tony Robbins seminar in which participants walk across

burning hot coals. Jesus came to rescue his followers who were struggling in a storm; and one of them decided to test Jesus instead of simply thanking and trusting in him.

Another lesson we learn from Peter is that sometimes when we ask for something, Jesus says, “Okay.” In this story, Jesus gave a one word answer to Peter’s test, “Come.” I can imagine Jesus said it with a twinkle in his eye (or a shake of his head). He knew Peter’s limits, yet he allowed Peter to find his limits himself. Jesus knows each of our limits. And like Peter, we need to learn our limits, too. That’s okay. Many of us will try some lake walking in our lives.

The good news is that when Peter failed, Jesus did not abandon him. Instead, Jesus reached out and saved him. Though Jesus allowed the experience, he did not allow Peter to sink. It is good to know that even when we put conditions on our faith in God, the Lord has compassion on us and will save us despite ourselves.

So to summarize what we learn from the story:

- Jesus is God.
- We are not.
- We have freedom to fail, even to test God.
- When we cry out for help, Jesus will save us.

We can take those lessons with us in life—we don’t have to try to walk on Lake Lanier to learn them. Of course not many of us will try to walk on water. However, *all* of us will face some other water-walking types of challenges.

Like when someone we love is making a mistake and we want to walk on water, so to speak, to rescue them. And then we find out we are not really helping the person. In fact, like Peter, we are sinking ourselves. It is then that we can remember to cry out and trust that Jesus will save us-- and the person we love-- in ways we can’t imagine.

Peter’s lesson also helps us when we are trying to figure out what to do next in our lives. We may want to try a great adventure—to walk on water, so to speak. That *may* be the right thing for us to do. There are times when courage and risk taking are what we need. Yet before we climb out on the lake, we need to pray first and center on what really matters. That might mean staying in the boat. We may need to learn to be faithful in the small things of life even when we get the urge to step out and do something big.

And when we feel the need to test the Lord, like Peter—our answer may not come in extraordinary events and memorable miracles. Instead, over time, we may find our answer in little things where Jesus’ presence helps us to find our way back to faith. For each one of us, that may feel or look different. Whatever our path, we can come to trust that God is with us in the storms of life and that his presence saves us no matter what we may face.

Amen.