

If It Is You

This morning's second reading is Matthew 14:22-33, Hear the word of God.

"Immediately he made the disciples get into a boat
and go on ahead to the other side,
while he dismissed the crowds.

And after he had dismissed the crowds,
he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone,
but by this time the boat, battered by the waves,
was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

And early in the morning he came walking
toward them on the sea.

But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea,
they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!"
And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said,
"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you,
command me to come to you on the water."

He said, "Come."

So Peter got out of the boat,
started walking on the water,
and came toward Jesus.

But when he noticed the strong wind,

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he became frightened, and,
beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"
Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him,
saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"
When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.
And those in the boat worshiped him, saying,
"Truly you are the Son of God."

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God within us, for
the word of God among us,
Thanks be to God.

You might have heard, "'So and so' walks on water." It means that 'so and so' is believed to be able to do the impossible. It can also mean 'so and so' can do no wrong, sometimes in a negative sense as in, should I say, their excretory material possesses no disagreeable olfactory qualities. If you are like me, afraid of high expectations, you definitely don't want to hear, "Oh he walks on water" said of yourself, because walking on water is impossible. Oh, there are those little water striders at the old fishin' hole and that cute lizard on the nature videos that can make it look easy. I can clearly remember, in my misspent youth, backing away from the edge of the pool to get a running start and peeling out to see how far I could get. The answer was always nowhere, and I was a lot lighter back then.

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Jesus walks on water in three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and John. Only Matthew has Peter joining him on the water. Luke has Jesus calming the sea from the safety - and the well-established physics - of a boat, but all the gospels suggest Jesus in his human form possessed the same miraculous domination of nature the breath of God exercised over the face of the deep in the Genesis account of creation.

It has often been suggested that Jesus' water-walking had parallels in Greek and Roman mythology of gods and divinely-empowered humans traversing the open sea. I found a great paper by UNC scholar of the classics, Brian McPhee. He argues that all the mythological figures of the ancient world magically flew or ran over the sea, defying, not the physical properties of water, but the obstacle of distance of a body of water, or the time and effort it would take to travel that distance. This is a really great point. If you had the power to defy the laws of physics, wouldn't you just click your heels and transport to the other side? Kamie and I just flew home from visiting our daughter Naomi in Europe last week. My arms are still tired! What I wouldn't give to be able to jump the distance in a heartbeat. I'd see my girl a lot more often, I promise you that. But if I could walk the ocean from here to there, I'd still take a plane.

Jesus walked. The Greek word in the original is "peripateo," walking around, just as he would on land, treading step by step, not just traversing the distance, but covering the distance physically, bodily. He is present at every footfall. Which is why it is not just by

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chance he appears at the exact time and place where the disciples are stuck. Kind of like the Samaritan who, present in every step, sees the roadside suffering of his neighbor while the others only see their destination.

And appear he does, scaring the disciples silly. But what are they actually afraid of? "It is a ghost!," they cry. The Greek word is actually *phantasma*, literally, a vision or appearance of something, independent from the ability to confirm exactly what it is. The problem, of course, is that what has appeared is obviously impossible. Jesus says, "Trust me! It's me!," and, make no mistake, the issue is trust. Do they trust their senses that tell them a man is walking on the water? Do they trust their sense that tells them a man cannot walk on the water? Do they trust the one saying, "Trust me!"? Surely, their senses did at some point deceive them. Somewhere along the line, what they had been sure was true had been proven false. And, hopefully, they had learned what we know all too well, the one who asks for your trust doesn't even know what trust is. Trust is earned, not given.

When faith is dispersed more or less equally between these three competing claims, which we would be wise to do, the faith in each individual claim is going to look pretty frail, or in Jesus' terms, little. In fact, if we put more faith in our senses than in what we know to be true, or vice versa, things might not turn out so well. If we entrust too much power with the guy who says only he can fix it, well, let's all just hope that doesn't happen.

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Now, we cannot know what the gospel author had in mind when he cooked up this story, and, frankly, it probably wasn't this, but what if "O ye of little faith" was Jesus telling Peter, "You did the faith thing right. I agree, a little dusting of faith in all these competing claims is definitely the way to go. Why did you doubt it?" And out of the process, Peter found that he could go ahead and doubt that a man can walk on water . . . a lot, . . . but he could not doubt at all who Jesus was. That was, after all, his question, "Is it really You?" Maybe a little faith is more powerful than a showy kind of over-inflated faith. Little faith can grow, like that mustard seed Jesus told us about. Big, showy faith can only be proved wrong.

This is about as far as I can take a literal reading of this text. It really doesn't serve us to debate whether anyone walked on water, or failed to. I think the reading that "Peter didn't have enough faith," is just wrong. It mistakes Simon Peter for Peter Pan. "I believe I can fly!" Famous last words. If anything, he had too much faith!

Faith, in its true essence, and contrary to both traditional religion AND its critics, is not the expectation that the impossible can happen. It is the process by which we discover what IS possible. "Why do you doubt?" Faith in the impossible, besides being the very definition of stupidity, is what philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre called bad faith. It is a lie we tell ourselves, a deception for which we have only ourselves to blame. If we are honest, we can see that faith must consider all claims, evaluating each of them against the whole sea of possibilities, while never trusting too much in any one of them. This

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for me is the meaning of Jesus' walkabout. His path, in every step, includes every step of the way, from the prayerful mountaintop all the way to Golgotha. Peter trusts only the water between the boat and Jesus to hold him up.

There is a famous meditation joke which actually appeared in a language training ad a few years ago. A brand new radio operator for the German Coast Guard gets a distress call from a British ship.

"Mayday, Mayday. Hello, can you hear us? We are sinking. We are sinking." The German recruit pauses, then keys the microphone and responds, "Vaht are you sinkink about?" Thoughts are considered the enemy of meditation. The goal is usually to have no thoughts, but what they don't tell you is that having no thoughts is the same as having all the thoughts at once. Next time you are trying to get some peace and quiet inside your head, instead of trying to silence that one disturbing thought, try to listen to all the thoughts at once. No thoughts, all thoughts. The effect is the same. Come and see, this Thursday at 9:30 am in the Youth Room. Meditation is back, Baby!

Speaking of meditation, why, yes, I do have a Zen koan to help make some sense of this. It is one you might have heard before, case 46 from the Mumonkan, and it goes like this:

"Master Sekiso said, 'From the top of a pole one hundred feet high, how do you step forward?'

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To be on top of the one hundred foot pole is to be able to claim that you can finally see everything just as it is. You have the best view available. You know everything that can be known. In Zen, that means you see no separation between life and death, me and you, this and that. There is only one point of view, and you have it. Or as Jesus said, "I and the Father are one." It is a perfectly valid and, let's be honest, pretty enjoyable point of view, . . . as long as you stay high atop a mountain by yourself. But step off that mountain and the rules change. It is your view against everyone else's. Hold too tightly to your own and it will be hell to pay. It's best to stay up there if you can. It is a long way down! Or maybe it is better to have never ascended in the first place.

I got a good picture of this in Berlin, a few weeks ago at the Denkmal, which is German for memorial, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. As you approach, it looks like a whole city block of gray cement blocks about the same size as a coffin and roughly the same height. You can see the blocks are rigorously ordered in a 90 degree grid, separated by a cobblestone path paved very like most of the sidewalks in the city. The path is only wide enough to walk single-file.

As you enter, your view is well above the blocks and you can see the city all around you. You can hear the sounds of traffic and talk easily with the people who are with you. You choose a path between the blocks and walk forward. You quickly notice that you are walking downhill and the blocks all around you are getting taller. Your view

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of the city disappears. You can only see gray concrete and the single point view head of you. The sound of the city drops below the sound of your breath which is a little faster that it was. The only people you see either startle you at the nearest corner or appear indistinctly, and only for a moment, at the end of a long corridor. You turn at the next corner only to see a corridor very much like the one you just left.

At the center of the memorial, the blocks, now more than 15 feet tall, tower above you. The sky is reduced to the view you might find at the bottom of a well. A child, mistaking this place for a playground, has taken a quick turn and run out of sight of his mother. The mother calls, a little desperately, "Maxie!," a little louder, "Maxie!" It is not a maze. You know you only have to walk in a straight line to get out, and you do, but you notice you are walking a little faster with each step. Breathing becomes a bit easier only after the city view and your orientation returns.

You have experienced two radically different sides of this event, call them the view from the top of the pole and the view from the bottom, or the view of Jew caught in an ingenious murder machine and the view of the German conscience blinded to consequences of a single pointed certainty. Or, perhaps, if you happen to be working on a sermon, the view of Jesus on the water and the view of Peter IN the water.

The truth is no one takes the first step off the hundred foot pole on their own. The first time, and maybe the first hundred times, you are knocked off. True faith is when all faith fails and somehow the

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hand of the one on the water and the hand of the one in the water meet. Where does that step forward off the pole land? For the Christian, you land on Jesus. For the Zen student, you land in your life. And, maybe, if you have been to the top of the pole and have stepped forward from there, you can see, . . . there is simply no separation between the two.