



Pastor Caleb Douglas' Sermon

Pentecost 11A, August 13, 2023
Matthew 14:22–33

One of the characteristics of the time that the Lord has appointed for you and for me to live in, is that there has been a long decline in what could be called biblical literacy. Many of you have probably noticed this decline over the course of your lifetime. You have seen the widespread removal of the Bible from our public discourse. This is part of a much broader mission by our secularizing age, to force any vestige of the Christian faith to the sidelines of public life, and in the end to force it out altogether. At least for now, it is still acceptable that someone label oneself as a Christian. That is permissible, at least so long as that one doesn't claim that it should affect how one lives one's life in the public square. So long as we keep our Christian faith to ourselves, the spirit of our age is mostly content to leave us alone. At least for now. Well, we know that there is no such thing as a private religious sphere. There is no such thing as keeping Christ to ourselves. If Christ is alive, then he is at work in this world. If Christ is alive, then he claims every sphere of our lives as his own, private or public, the domestic as well as the economic.

One of the consequences of the removal of the bible from public discourse is that people just simply no longer know the words and the language of the bible in the way that they used to. Well though much of biblical knowledge and literacy has been lost, there is one phrase that has still not been lost in our culture: walking on water. When you hear that phrase, what does that bring to mind for you? I think it is typically used in this way, "that person walks on water, they can do no wrong." As often as not, that phrase is muttered in envy or criticism: "just because she got that award doesn't mean she walks on water." But is that the Jesus Matthew depicts here? What about Peter, he walked on water too? Is Jesus presented as untouchable, unreachable, and maybe even a bit haughty? I think if we look closely at the details of this story, a different understanding of what Jesus is doing will emerge. So to the passage.

Jesus had just finished feeding the five thousand. He had healed their sick all day long, and then, after a long day, he takes five loaves and two fish, and feeds five thousand men, along with an unnumbered multitude of women and children. And then he sends his disciples before him on a boat. Notice the way that Matthew frames the story: "Then [Jesus] *made* the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side." Jesus *made* them go. That could have been translated with much stronger words: as *compelled*, or *obliged*, or even *forced* them to go. We are to see from this, that Jesus was setting them up. Whatever comes afterwards, was in the mind of Jesus, was part of his purpose and plan. Now, in one sense, that is always the case. The three persons of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, have providentially ordered all things. There is nothing that is outside of his sovereignty, there is beyond the reach of God's loving will to bless and to save his people. So when Matthew emphasizes this, when scripture takes the time to point it out, we should ask the question: why?

So why does Jesus compel them to get into the boat and send them out before him to the other side? So that they will come to a greater recognition of who he is. We already heard it read so I don't need to hide it. At the end of the story the disciples all fell before Jesus, worshipping him, and said, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33). Jesus is setting up his disciples so that they will have a greater knowledge of who he is, that they will know something more about what it means that Jesus is the Son of God, and that it is his will to save them. He compels his disciples into the boat, because he will not leave them with an insufficient imagination about who he is. He will not leave them with a small knowledge of himself.

Now this is probably the moment to mention something about what we heard from the Book of Job. Job is a magnificent book. There is no better book of the Bible that helps us to see the glory and majesty of God. It is a hard book to read, because there is so little commentary by the writer of the book. There are no easy lessons to conclude. There are only difficult lessons: but they are worth the work. One of the main points of the story is to show us, through Job, that God is greater than we have ever or could ever imagine.

The glory and the majesty and the power of God are greater than we have ever and could ever conceive. Job had thought that God was like him, and that he could call God to account, that he could stand before him man to man and justify himself before God. God comes to him, and he has to come down from heaven to do so, and instead of Job questioning God, God questions him:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who determined its measurements? – surely *you* know! ... Who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?... Have you comprehended the expanse of the universe? Declare, if *you* know all this!"

Questions like that go on for four whole chapters. The end of this conversation, which we didn't hear, has Job saying this, "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Job's very existence, his being was called into question, when he stood before God Almighty, man to man, as it were.

C. S. Lewis gets at this same idea in a magnificent scene in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when the four Pevensie children first hear about Aslan, the great lion. They had heard that he was the ruler of Narnia, but they had assumed he was a man. When they heard that he was a lion, suddenly they were concerned. Susan, the oldest of the children, asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan is safe, since he is not a man but a lion. Mr. Beaver answers, saying, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King."

The Pevensie children had to learn that there is something far better than a safe God. Job had to learn that it is far better for him that God be infinitely greater than himself. Job had to learn to fear God. Not the way one fears a tyrant; not the way that one is afraid of being harmed—but the way one should be before infinite and perfect and all-powerful Goodness. For he is something far better than safe, he is good—completely and perfectly and unremittingly *good*. And precisely because we are not good as we ought to be, when we stand before him, he is anything but safe—and that is good news.

The disciples had to learn this too. So Jesus compels them forward, sends them out before him on a boat, knowing that a storm would arise. And then, in the midst of the storm, they see someone on the water. And even though they had just seen Jesus feed thousands from one lunchbox, the idea that Jesus could come to them on the waves of a storm was still beyond their imagination, was still beyond their idea of their master. And so they think that it is a ghost.

But from the midst of the storm they hear the voice of Jesus. Hear once again what Saint Matthew records, "Immediately [Jesus] spoke to them, saying, 'Take heart, it is I; have no fear.'" Now I just said a few moments ago that Job had to learn the fear of the Lord, and that the disciples had to learn the same thing. But Jesus is here telling them to have *no* fear. Am I contradicting scripture? I don't believe so. Scripture tells us many times that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Just a few chapters before this, Jesus had told his disciples to "fear only God who can destroy both body and soul" (Matthew 10:28). But Scripture also says, in 1 John, that perfect love casts out all fear. So which of these is true? Both of them.

To fear God aright is to have no fear. To fear God is ultimately to know his love, and that love casts out all fear. As Luther said in the beginning of his explanation of the first commandment, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all other things." Only when that is true of us, will we be truly free of all other fears, the fear of failure, the fear of rejection, the fear of death, even the fear of our sin overtaking us. This trust is shown for us in what happens next in the Gospel. Peter hears Jesus' voice, and he responds, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." Much has been made about Peter walking on the water. But notice that Peter is not all that interested in the water. He's not trying to show the power of his own faith. What Peter wants is to be where Jesus is. The water only matters because to get to Jesus, water is the path. But think about how much has changed in Peter. Just a moment before this, none of the disciples thought that it could have been Jesus. None of the disciples imagined that the Jesus that they knew could come to them on the stormy waves. But now, after just a word from Jesus, now Peter believes that not only can Jesus walk on the water, but so too can he if the Lord would but call him.

Now most of the sermons that I have heard on this passage essentially stop there, with some form of a call to be like Peter, trusting in the Lord enough to do hard things, or dangerous or scary things for Jesus. But that's not enough for us. We need something more. What was it that changed Peter? Was it someone telling him to have more faith? Was it someone telling him to stop being afraid? Was he told that he needed to be like someone else who trusted Jesus more?

What changed Peter was hearing the voice of the Lord. He saw him, and thought he was a ghost. He heard his voice, and he was changed. "Faith comes through hearing," our reading from Romans said, "and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). It is hearing the voice of the Lord that gives confidence, that builds courage, that changed Peter. So if we are going to trust in the Lord the same way that Peter did, then what we must do is hear over and over again the voice of Jesus. We must be where we will hear his voice. The point is not that we are all to be like Peter. The point is the power of the voice of Jesus. Peter did not change himself, he had been changed by the Word of the Lord.

But we know what comes next. Jesus calls Peter to come, and he walks out on the water. But Peter again becomes afraid when he is no longer looking to Jesus, but instead looks to the wind. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" And "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him." Jesus was at hand to save. The voice of the Lord changed something in Peter, so that what he just before thought Jesus couldn't to, now can't prevent him from coming to Jesus. But the last thing that Peter needed to be saved from, was from his own best attempt at following Jesus. Is that not the same with us? We have heard the voice of the Lord. We are growing in our understanding of the power of the Word of God. We are trying to follow Jesus. But we know, that we need to be saved even from our efforts to answer his call.

But the good news of the Gospel is that Jesus saves to the uttermost. He doesn't call us to himself and then leave us to ourselves to figure out how to follow him. He saves us even from our attempts to answer his call, from our attempts at being good disciples. That doesn't mean that we are free from the need to work at following Jesus. That doesn't free us to be lazy in our discipleship. That doesn't mean that the things we do are unimportant. But it does mean that the Gospel is always better news than we have imagined before. And when we hear Jesus' voice, and when we call upon him, he is always at hand to save us, even from our best attempts at following him. And when we do this, we will know more and more that Jesus is better than safe, he is good, and he is the truly the Son of God, who wills nothing but good for you, to the glory of God the Father, who with the Son and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, now and forever.

Amen