

Getting Out of the Boat

Our Gospel story today begins immediately after the feeding of the 5000. Jesus dismisses the crowds and goes up a mountain to pray and spend some quality alone time to rejuvenate after an intense people-heavy day.

The disciples are to cast off in their fishing boats onto the Sea of Galilee, presumably to eventually meet back up with Jesus on the other side.

In some ways, the Sea of Galilee was a familiar and comfortable place for most of the disciples. Many of them, after all, were fishermen by trade. It was also the quickest way to get across the lake and an effective way to take time off from the crowds of people.

Serene lakes and peaceful flowing streams aside, the Hebrew people were not a seafaring people. It was the Philistines and the Phoenicians who were the people of the sea, their territories bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

Due to the Sea of Galilee's location in a valley between ranges of hills, the wind that whipped through those hills could change that serene lake into something fearsome and unrecognizable in a short amount of time.

In Old Testament poetry, it was common for the waters to be written about as a force that posed a threat to human life.

In the creation story in Gen 1, when God begins to create the world, the world is a dark, watery chaos. God starts his creative work by asserting control over this chaos.

When the flood waters rise in the story of Noah in Genesis 6-9, they destroy all of life on the earth, both human and animal. In fact, no life would have survived if God had not intervened and ordered Noah to build his ark and gather in the animals.

The psalmists frequently use water imagery to illustrate their despair, such as in Psalm 69:1-3

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.

In Exodus, the Israelites panic when they are trapped between two enemies, the Red Sea and the quickly approaching Egyptian armies.

Interestingly, when John the revelator envisions a new heaven and a new earth in Revelations 21, he makes a point in noting that “the sea was no more.”

As you can see, there are many connections to be made concerning waters representing the chaotic and perhaps even evil forces of life. However, it is also important to note that in those passages, the power of God is stronger than those forces of chaos.

In the creation story, God asserts his control over the formless void that covered the face of the deep.

In the story of Noah, the waters that threatened to destroy all creation eventually subside with a remnant to repopulate the earth.

In the Exodus story, God parts the sea so that the Israelites can cross on dry land, a phenomenon that would be repeated in Joshua 3 as the Israelites enter the promised land.

In Psalm 104, the writer wonders at the sea, great and wide, yet notes that God created the Leviathan, the feared sea creature, to sport in it. Or as my seminary professor put it, the leviathan as God's rubber ducky.

I make all of these connections to identify the important symbolism of today's Gospel story that would not have been lost on the Gospel's original audience.

When Jesus approaches the disciples, walking upon the stormy sea, and when he gets into the boat and the wind ceases, Jesus is exercising a prerogative that belongs to God alone.

Who is this that comes walking on the sea? Of course it must be a ghost. The only other alternative was that it was an earthly manifestation of the power of God.

As though to emphasize this connection, Jesus' words to them contain two statements that are traditionally associated with the divine.

The first is: *It is I*, literally in the Hebrew, *ego eimi*, or "I am," which is how God identifies Godself to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14.

Iwan Russell-Jones writes:

"In these brief but charged words and in the awesome vision that unfolds before the disciples, Jesus is identifying himself with God, the liberator and

redeemer of Israel, who is at the same time the creator of the world and the victor over chaos”

The second part of Jesus’ statement is *Do not be afraid*, words heard repeatedly in scripture from the mouths of Holy messengers during calling stories, and notably to our story, in Isaiah 43:1-2

But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

This is a story about the nature of God revealed through Jesus, but it is also a story about human fear and doubt, as we wrestle with forces in life that are much bigger than us.

Dock Hollingsworth identifies three types of fear in this story.

Initially, the disciples actually fear Jesus himself coming towards them.

This is not a fear of the person of Jesus, but a fear that comes from misidentification, or perhaps a fear of the unknown.

Sometimes in our lives we would rather live with the storms we know than to risk that which we do not know or understand.

In the Exodus story, the Israelites cry out to God on several occasions that they would rather return to their captivity in Egypt than face the wilderness.

At least in Egypt they knew what they were getting.

Sometimes our fear of what we do not know keeps us from experiencing the saving power of God.

A second type of fear is the motivating fear that moves us *toward* Jesus. Peter exemplifies this in this story. Sometimes fear can actually be a *good* motivator.

Peter, who often gets a bad rap in the Gospels as the bumbling disciple who gets everything wrong, is nevertheless the only disciple with the courage to consider that perhaps he would be better off with the power of God manifesting through Jesus that defied the wind and the waves than he would be facing those same wind and waves in a small fishing boat. Sometimes, especially when faced with a hard decision and a worse one, we stumble upon the saving grace of God.

As William Willimon puts it in one of his sermons:
“If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith.”

Finally, there is the fear that distracts. Peter’s first few steps on the water exemplify a faith motivated by fear, and action taken in spite of fear, but how often do we also falter a few steps in when our brain checks back into reality and we see the seemingly insurmountable wind and waves whipping around us?

Contained within these few verses are the cycles of fear and faith that we go through in life. The fear of the unknown which pushes us away from the face of God revealed to us in stranger and neighbor alike, the fear which motivates us to take a tentative step towards Jesus, and the fear which inevitably sidetracks us, causing us to sink or turn back towards the boat.

At the story's end, Jesus reaches out his hand to Peter and catches him, saying "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Without hearing the inflection in his voice it is hard to know how Jesus meant that.

Was he angry and disappointed that the disciples fell short? Or was it a chiding but loving statement Jesus made, understanding human nature and knowing that Peter did the best he could?

In Matthew 17:20 Jesus will tell his disciples:

For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'

A little faith may be all that is needed to transform a story that starts in terror into a story that ends in worship, with the disciples proclaiming: "Truly you are the Son of God."

May we, as contemporary readers of this text, and as contemporary followers of Christ, who experience the same cycles of doubt, fear, and glimpses of inspiring faith as the first disciples, continue to seek the God whose loving power triumphs over evil, chaos and fear. May we continue to defy the pounding of our hearts, stepping into unknown water, confident that even our feeble faith can move mountains when grounded in the power of God that calms our storms.