

Water Walking
Matthew 14: 22-33
Don Lincoln

I've always liked boats and water. I began sailing at age 8; canoeing at age 10. I've been on deep sea fishing boats, little skiffs; Navy cruisers and 5 foot dinghies. I like the water, and I like boats. Except when I don't.

When I lived in Annapolis, I had a 26-foot sailboat. It had belonged to the church's previous pastor. It was old; but it was mine. A pastor friend, looking to get a sailboat, asked me to take him and his wife sailing – she'd never been and he wanted her to see what a joy it might be. I said sure I'll take you.

My boat was docked in a cove off the Severn River. Not far off the river at all, above the Naval Academy if you know where that is in Annapolis. The river is wide enough there for a decent sail. It was sunny that day, with a modest breeze, and I let my friend take the tiller. We sailed downriver, under the Route 50 bridge toward the academy, then tacked, and headed back toward my cove. Suddenly, out of nowhere – just over the tall, steep banks and high trees lining the river – appeared black clouds – a wall of the darkest, blackest clouds I ever recall seeing. Just about then the breeze started to freshen. .



I scrambled to the mast, and lowered the mainsail, leaving the jib up for headway. And then it started. First, a stiff gust or two, and scattered big droplets. I encouraged my friend's wife to go below in the cabin. She didn't hesitate. I closed the hatch just as the skies opened and a downpour engulfed us.

I grabbed the tiller, told my friend to head to the mast, and lower the jib once I got the outboard motor going. I tugged on the motor cord, but the wind and the rain were so loud I couldn't hear if it started. I held my other hand on the engine case while I pulled the cord again, and eventually felt the vibration. That is the only way I knew that it had started.

I turned to tell my friend to lower the sail, and could barely see him at the mast 15 feet away. I screamed above the wind and rain for him to drop the sail. I could not see the front of my boat. I could not see bridge or shore.

The wind was pushing us sideways in the water as I steered in what I hoped was NOT the direction of bridge abutments or shallow water where my 5 foot deep keel would get stuck. It seemed like forever, but in probably 10 minutes, the squall passed. On my way home, I listened to the radio and learned the micro-cell had wind gusts of 50 knots.

I've always liked boats and water. Except when I don't. I guess the disciples felt the same way. Especially **THAT** night in this story.

Jesus went to pray. Told the disciples, "...get in the boat and go to the other side." They follow orders, and are making their way across the sea when the wind kicks up. They pull at the oars, but are getting nowhere. The wind is pushing them back, the waves are battering the boat, possibly even water getting in the boat. And now it's night. Darkness exaggerates everything. A hundred yards in the daytime looks like ten miles at night; 5 minutes like 5 hours. Night just does things to us.¹

I've always liked boats and water. Except when I don't. I generally like sailing the waters of life. Except when I don't.

Rough seas are rarely fun. At times they can be terrifying. How many of us do NOT know those times in life when we feel like we are sailing in our own personal version of that movie, "The Perfect Storm?"

The disciples are battling rough seas, and evidently Jesus sees this. He comes walking to them on the water in the early morning hours – sometime between 3:00am-6:00am – while it is still dark. Could this be a declaration of Jesus' divine presence? Possibly. Scripture tells us only God can walk on the waters. In Job, Isaiah, Habakkuk and Psalms – God alone "tramples the waves."

And when the terrified disciples shout out that it is a ghost, Jesus says to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." But the words for "It is I" are also translated elsewhere, "I am." Like "I am who I am." Sound familiar?

Some scholars suggest this is exactly why Peter can't walk on water. Only God can. And Jesus is using that great "I AM" – GOD language – to say clearly who He is – the divine one who tramples the waves.

But wait a minute. I grew up near creeks. I loved to go creek-ing. Remember – I like the water. Skimming rocks; catching crawdads; minnows; tadpoles. But you know what I really marveled at the first time I saw them? Water striders. Long-legged creatures that zipped across the water. My dad said, "it's the surface tension, Don." "OK, dad." I just thought it was amazing.

Then there's the so called "Jesus lizard." He can do it. Just zips along the water! Maybe Peter has seen one of those! Maybe Peter thinks you don't have to be divine to stride across the waves!!! Go Peter!



There's a pastor once wrote a book titled "If You Want To Walk On Water, You Have to Get Out of the Boat."

Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJMqDsurJQ8>

In essence he says, if you never leave the safety of the boat, you'll never walk on water. Then he goes on to say the reason Peter sinks is because Peter takes his eyes off Jesus. Doesn't stay focused.

I've preached that sermon on this text. Take the step. The step of faith. And keep your eyes on Jesus. But if that's literally the point, why would true, faithful, believing Christians ever need boats?

Look at the story! It is NOT Jesus' idea for Peter to start water walking. Jesus does NOT invite Peter to get out of the boat first. It's Peter's idea. Peter shouts across the waves: "Lord, if it IS you" " Peter is testing. "OK, Lord – if it's really you, then let me walk on the water." Not even "Save my friends, or calm the wind." "Prove it to me!" So Jesus responds to Peter's request, and basically says, "OK – have at it, Peter!"

Peter's words remind me of another story – if you are the son of God, turn these stones to bread. If you are who you say you are – the Son of God, throw yourself off this pinnacle. I think Peter wants to put Jesus to the test and in the attempt to test Jesus, ends up testing himself.

Jesus agrees to Peter's request for a water-walk, and then Jesus both rescues him from, and chides him for his little faith and his need for miracles and spectacles – for not believing it was Jesus all along – for needing just one more magic trick. You don't test God. "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Jesus only says that to Peter, by the way. There is no rebuke for the others, who had faith enough to STAY in the boat, hauling on the oars until their Lord came. Maybe this story is about THEM, about the eleven other disciples, who never thought of themselves as particularly heroic, who never dreamed of putting Jesus to the test, who were willing to row against the wind until Jesus got into the boat with them, no matter how long it took Him to get there.

They were not looking for exemptions from the wind and waves. They were just looking for their Lord to join them where they were, and **THAT** was when the miracle happened. NOT while Jesus and Peter were doing the fancy stuff out on the water, but once Jesus

had everyone back together in the boat. The text says **THAT** was when the wind ceased – shhhhhhh – just like that. And those in the boat worshipped Him, saying "Truly, you are the Son of God."²

What happens next? They get across the lake, and pick up with ministry again.

That's why it's the **WHOLE** story – and not just Peter's little swim – speaks to me, particularly in the midst of the wind and the waves.

Think about the **WHOLE** story. Jesus "compels" – instructs the disciples – that's you and me – to take the boat – the boat's always a symbol in the early life of Christianity for the church – to take the boat across the sea – which can often be a place of chaotic possibilities and anxiety. To cross the sea and meet Jesus on the other side – in some new place, some new territory, some new land – someplace we don't even know exactly what it's going to look like or what life will be like out there. Take the boat to that new place where I will gift you to continue to preach and teach the kingdom of God to whoever is there. Isn't that is our reason for being?

So – get in the boat, stay in it, go to the other side, get to a new place that you can't even see yet, bring the Kingdom there. The going may be hard and slow – but when isn't that the case with the church? But even then, there is no suggestion Jesus ever asks the disciples to abandon ship. He knows how hard the going is, and He is patient with the progress His disciples are making. And He will **NOT** abandon them.³

"Be not afraid." One of His favorite phrases! He says it again. "Stay in the boat, pull on the oars, stay the course, I am with you," Jesus says. "Be not afraid."

Sometimes church can feel like we're not making much headway. Sometimes the wind and waves that beset the church buffet us, challenge us, and even frighten us. We wonder whether we're seeing things as they really are; if we're in the right place; if we're still going in the right direction.

Jesus compels us to stay in the boat, to stay the course, and cross the deep waters to the opposite shore. And not spend our time looking for miracle moments, doing things we're not equipped to do in the middle of the lake – but to keep rowing, together, no matter how distant the other shore may be.

My pastor friend and his wife I took sailing? I was amazed when he told me a month later they had gotten a boat. I was certain that first sail of his wife's was going to be her last. He told me that actually, once they recovered from the experience, she said to him some days later – "If we can survive that, I'm sure we'll be fine on the water. Let's do it!" They've been sailors ever since.

Fear and anxiety may well beset us when we're on deep waters. But the One who has compelled us to get into this ship and push out onto the lake of life says each and every

day, "I will be with you. Fear not. Be not afraid. Be of good cheer. I will be with you on every pull of the oar. You belong to Me."

Dear friends, in the midst of these troubled waters, let us keep pulling for the other shore and not be afraid.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. From Fred Craddock, "Fear and Faith," in *The Cherry Log Sermons*.
2. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, sermon titled "*Why Did You Doubt?*", 1977.
3. Pastor Brian Donst, Winona, Ontario; 8/6/14 posting on www.midrash.com to his blog at Fifty United Church.