

HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew 14:22-33 NRSV, emended

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the fourteenth chapter.

C: Glory to you, O Lord.

[After feeding the great crowds in the deserted place,] Jesus immediately made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After he dismissed them, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, and by this time the boat—battered by the waves—was far from the land, and the wind was against them.

Early in the morning Jesus came walking toward the disciples on the sea. When they 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, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus 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, he became frightened. Beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When Peter and Jesus got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat praised Jesus, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God!"

P: The Gospel of Our Lord!

C: Praise to you, O Christ.

"Why did you doubt?" That's the question Jesus asks Peter after he pulls him out of the sea. And just before he did this – and before Peter's not entirely successful water-walking experience – he identifies himself with the Greek words, **ego eimi**: I Am. This is the name given from the burning bush to Moses. More on that later in the sermon.

In the meantime, I think Peter knew why he sank and I think that Jesus' question is more like directions to the truth than anything else. We're actually told why he began to sink: he shifted his attention from Jesus to the wind and waves. And then he became afraid. And then he began to sink. He stopped paying attention to Jesus and started giving his attention to the strong winds.

To what do you give your attention? I think that we tend to find what we're looking for. Certainly this is true of social media where, no matter where you are on the political and sanity spectrum, you'll find those who will say "Amen!" to what you're laying down.

So, what are you paying attention to these days?

When I talked with Karen last night, she had just watched the evening news and was completely overwhelmed by what she heard and saw. I told her that's why I don't watch it anymore. Don't get me wrong, I think we have an obligation to know something about what's going on in the world today, but it sure can be overwhelming. In a half hour broadcast, there was enough to set Karen's hair on fire!

So, what are you giving your attention to these days? And what attitude do you bring to what you are attentive to?

Jesus was exhausted. He's been teaching and healing and feeding and being rejected in his own hometown. And then he hears about the execution of his cousin, his friend, John. At that time, he withdraws from everyone to a deserted place by himself, apparently by boat, because we are told that when he came to shore, the crowds had followed him on foot, and with great compassion he cured all their sick. Again, this seems to have taken him most of the day. Finally, it's around suppertime and the people are still there, hungry. The disciples want to send them away, but Jesus has different plans and feeds all 5,000 of them.

After all of this we hear the first verse of today's gospel reading. *"Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go to the other side while he dismissed the crowds."* Again, how long it took to "dismiss" a crowd of that size is unknown, but I have a dim memory of how long it took to "dismiss" only a hundred or so people on a Sunday morning, so I'm sure this took him until after dark.

For the second time in as many days, Jesus goes off by himself – this time up the mountain to pray. But, as before, it doesn't last long. He has to be so absolutely beyond exhausted, so completely spent.

Maybe that's why he decides to take a stroll across the Sea of Galilee. I have often wondered why he did the water-walking. Perhaps it was that he was so dang tired that he wasn't thinking straight. Or maybe walking on water serves the same purpose for him as bike riding does for me: it helped him clear his head and reconnect to his better angels, so to speak. Either way, it seems an odd thing for him to be doing. Don't get me wrong, Jesus can do what he wants, being the Son of God and all. We are simply not given a reason for this particular activity.

Since it was in the middle of the night, we can assume that he wasn't doing it to show off or anything. So why did he do it?

We're not told precisely, but it does appear that it had something to do with the situation his disciples found themselves in. We're told that when it was evening he was alone on the mountain, but the boat the disciples were in, battered by the wind, was still far away from shore because the wind was against them. Did he see this from his mountaintop perch? I imagine he could see that there was a storm, but did he know that his disciples might be in trouble?

Either way, he waits until early in the morning before he begins to walk across the water towards their boat. Why did he wait so long? Did he need some more time to recover from the exhausting work before helping his friends? Again, questions that we have no real answer for but I can't help but ask.

As he approaches them, they are terrified and say, "It's a ghost!" Now, us modern, scientific thinking folks might think this a foolish and superstitious conclusion to jump to, but what would *you* have thought if you saw someone walking across the sea during a storm? What logical, scientific explanation would *you* bring to this experience? Yeah. Thinking it's a ghost and being terrified is not as dumb a response as it might seem at first glance.

Jesus does not allow them to wallow in their fear, however, and lets them know that it's him. As I mentioned earlier, what he literally says is the Greek words *ego eimi*: meaning "I am," which is the name that God gave to Moses from the burning bush. But the first time we find that particular name for God – Yahweh: I am – is in the second chapter of Genesis. And in the third chapter we also witness something that went wrong – not a literal storm but certainly a seismic event: you know, that fruit eating incident – and God had some questions to ask the people at that time, just as he will have questions for Peter in just a moment.

After he tells them who he is, Peter – ever impulsive and over-confident Peter – decides that if this is Jesus, he should make it him by commanding him to walk on the water, too. Again, why? Well, first of all, it's Peter and this sounds like the most Peter thing ever. Impulsive, overly confident and, possibly, ill-informed and wrong-headed. I think Peter got one thing right in all of the gospels – when Jesus asked them who *they* – his disciples - thought he was, Peter gave the right answer! You are the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus tells him that this was divine inspiration, not his own thinking. And then the *very next thing Peter does* is to reprimand Jesus when he explains what it means to be the Messiah; after being named "Rock," Jesus calls him Satan! It's not like Peter's track record for saying and doing the smartest, wisest things is a particularly good one!

So here we are, a boat battered by the wind and waves, Jesus walking toward them on the water, terrified disciples, Jesus identifying himself as "I am", Peter walking on the water...then sinking, crying out to be saved, and Jesus saving him.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has an entry on flying. It says,

There is an art, or, rather, a knack to flying. The knack lies in learning how to throw yourself at the ground and miss. Pick a nice day and try it...Clearly, it is the second part, the missing, which presents the difficulties....If, however, you are lucky enough to have your attention momentarily distracted at the crucial moment by, say...a bomb going off in your vicinity, or by suddenly spotting an extremely rare species of beetle crawling along a nearby twig, then in your astonishment you will miss the ground completely and remain bobbing just a few inches above it in what might seem to be a slightly foolish manner.

I think this is similar to what happened with Peter. He was going to step out of the boat, which would lead him to sink, and rather than getting distracted by an extremely rare species of beetle crawling along a nearby twig, he got distracted by Jesus walking on the water...and discovered that he could, in fact, walk on water!

Or was it the wind that distracted him from Jesus? Either way, the question Jesus answers is much more rhetorical than most people seem to give it. It reminds me of the questions Yahweh/I AM asked Adam and Eve when he couldn't find him that one fateful evening. "Where are you?" (Like he didn't already know.) "Did you eat that fruit I told you not to eat?" (Like he hadn't already figured it out.) "What have you done?" (When, in fact, he knew exactly what had been done.)

"Why did you doubt?" he asks Peter, when we have already been provided with the (very understandable) answer: "But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened." He shifted his attention from the most real thing going on – Jesus, who happened to be walking on the water – to the second most real thing going on – the strong wind. And he got frightened.

I suppose he could have just as easily been distracted by a Facebook friend's exceptionally stupid and hateful post or by something someone said in the news. He could have become distracted and angry about one of the political ads now saturating the media. It could have been any number of very real things that took his attention off of Jesus and God's reality. It just happened to be the strong wind...and his subsequent fear of drowning...which caused him to begin to drown.

After having achieved flight, according to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, it tells us this:

Do not listen to what anybody says to you at this point because they are unlikely to say anything helpful. They are most likely to say something along

the lines of "Good God, you can't possibly be flying!" It is vitally important not to believe them or they will suddenly be right.

"You can't walk on water!" the wind screamed at Peter, and suddenly it was true. He couldn't. But he used to be able to when he was paying attention to Jesus.

Madeleine L'Engle writes this in her book, Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art:

God, through the angel Gabriel, called on Mary to do what, in the world's eyes, is impossible, and instead of saying, "I can't," she replied immediately. "Be it unto me according to thy word."

God is always calling on us to do the impossible. It helps me to remember that anything Jesus did during his life here on earth is something we should be able to do, too.

When spring-fed Dog Pond warms up enough for swimming, which usually isn't until June, I often go there in the late afternoon. Sometimes I will sit on a sun-warmed rock to dry, and think of Peter walking across the water to meet Jesus. As long as he didn't remember that we human beings have forgotten how to walk on water, he was able to do it.

There are not many things in this world of any consequence that we are directly in control of. Among the few that are in our arsenal are these two: What we pay attention to and what attitude we bring to whatever it is that we focus our attention on.

So, I'll ask it again: What are you paying attention to these days? There are millions of voices screaming across the internet and our TV screens. Is it the shrill and the hateful and the ignorant that you give you attention to? Or is it the lovely, the true, the beautiful that turns your head? Don't get me wrong, we need to be attentive to the bad things as well, but they do not own us. We are owned by another who loved us enough to lay down their life for the world, and it is that One who deserves our attention.

The Word of God is always inviting us, commanding us, to do things that are impossible or crazy...or maybe that's just how they seem to our human eyes. Perhaps we have forgotten that we can walk on water when our Master bids us come. Keep your eyes on Christ, however, and not the deafening wind that seems to be blowing all the time these days. Jesus will keep you afloat and moving forward.

Amen.