

“Stay in the Boat”
August 9, 2020
Matthew 14:22-33

Three monks sat by a lake, deep in meditation.

One stood up and said, “I’ve forgotten my mat.” Stepping on to the waters before him, he walked across to the other side, where their small hut stood.

When he returned, the second monk said, “I just remembered I haven’t dried my washed clothes.” He too, strode calmly across the water to the other bank and returned in a few minutes the same way.

The third monk watched them intently. Figuring that this was a test of his own skills, he loudly declared, “So you think your abilities are superior to mine! Watch me!” and scurried to the edge of the river bank. No sooner did he put his foot in than he fell into waist-high water. Unfazed, he waded out and tried again. And again, and again, to no avail.

After watching this performance in silence, one of his fellow monks asked the other, “D’ you suppose we should tell him where the stepping stones are?”

I have been reflecting on this familiar story about Peter walking on water. And have at least three lenses to think about it. You decide which one makes the most sense to you.

1. We typically hear this famous story as Peter’s attempt to meet Jesus on the stormy Sea of Galilee, and failed because he did not have enough faith. He saw Jesus out on the water. Asked his Lord to command him to come. Not to allow him, but to make him. So that he would no longer doubt who Jesus was.

We usually hear this story as a story about faith. Either you have enough or you don’t. Peter does not have enough. He steps out on the water like an Olympic hopeful on the balance beam. Laying each foot down on the water without a tremble. Then the wind gusts, he loses focus and down he goes while everyone in the boat watches helplessly.

So the moral of the story, if Peter had just kept his eyes on Jesus. If he had just more faith, then his fear might not have sunk him.

That is how I have always heard it. Jesus reached out his hand, caught Peter, and threw him over into the boat. “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” that stinging rebuke is usually heard as Jesus’s judgement on Peter’s sinking. He has faith and then he doesn’t.

2. It might be a comment on Peter’s grandstanding in the first place: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Make me do something extraordinary. Set me apart from these other men.

Grant me an exemption from the laws that bind ordinary people. And then I will believe that you are who you say you are.

That was when his doubt flared up. He was trying to make Jesus put an end to his uncertainty. We want the burden of proof to be on Jesus, not us. We want him to single us out for special treatment, to let us climb out of the boat and do what no one else gets to do – maybe get extra credit for volunteering to do it.

“Look at him so brave, so faithful, such a spiritual warrior.” Look at him, he can walk on water!”

I expect some way or another – we have all asked Jesus to prove himself by doing something spectacular for us. “Please, God, suspend the rules just once and make me know that you are there. Heal me, help me, talk to me. Leave me no room to doubt you and I will believe. If you are God don’t let this happen to me.”

Jesus could have said: who do you think are, Simon Peter? Sit back down. Find your oar! But that was not what Peter needed. What Peter needed was a couple of steps on the water (to cure his doubt) and then a nose full of sea water when the sea gave away beneath him (to cure his self-importance).

Jesus reached out his hand, caught Peter, and threw him over into the boat - saying “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

3. Or maybe Jesus’ story is about the other 11 disciples who stayed in the boat. “Lord, save me!” Peter cried as he began to go under water.

Jesus said - I was headed straight for you. I told you who I was. If you had kept your seat for one minute more. I would have been sitting right next to you, you and all the others, with no need for water aerobics out on the sea. (There are stones you can walk on.)

Remember, it was only Peter who left the boat and the community - in order to do a solo-thinking, perhaps, that this event would go down in history as a sign of great faith – never guessing that Jesus would call it the exact opposite. Jesus only says this to Peter. There is no rebuke for the others, who had enough faith to stay in the boat hauling oars together until their Lord came to them.

What do you think?

- 1) Maybe this is a story about the church’s need for heroes – for people who, like Peter, who are willing to risk their lives. To prove that Jesus is who he is. Think John Lewis who was beaten because he followed Jesus. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose risked his life for a better world. God knows we need more heroes.

- 2) Maybe this is a story about us. Because sometimes our faith is so strong, we feel like we can walk on water. “No doubt about it - God is in control. God will save us from the storm. And Jesus is in the boat with us.”

And then in a moment's time, we question- where is God? What does suffering continue? Why are people losing their jobs and homes? Lord, if you will do this then I will believe. We try to believe but instead we fall overboard and feel like we are drowning. Somedays you have faith and then other times it is just too hard.

- 3) Finally, notice, it was only Peter who left the boat and the community in order to do a solo. So maybe this is really - a story about the other eleven disciples. Who never thought of themselves as particularly heroic. Who never dreamed of putting Jesus to the test, but - who were willing to row against the wind until he got into the boat with them, no matter how long it took. They weren't looking for exemptions. They were just looking for their Lord to join them. Where they are.

And my friends, that was when the miracle happened. Not while he and Peter were out doing fancy stuff on the water, but once Jesus had everyone back together in the boat.
(pause)

I'm going with that one today.

Stay in the boat. Wait for the miracle. And oar together with all the faith you can muster - in the midst of a terrible storm. And be assured Jesus is right beside you.

Here we are in this parking lot (or on your internet) to worship a powerful God who calms the worst storms. And we are waiting in our cars. Separate but on we are in the same place - the same boat. If you will. Think of it like the Lake MI Express Ferry from Muskegon to Milwaukee. The cars are all lined up and traveling together to get to the other side. Trusting we will arrive safely.

These are nervous and unprecedented times – and so it seems to me we have to row these oars - together. So stay on the boat no matter what. That is when the miracle happens. The wind ceased – shhh- just like that.

And those in the boat (our cars) worshipped him saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”