

Get Out of the Boat!

19th Weekend in Kingdomtide – September 24/25, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Coming to worship each week seems so safe, so comfortable – probably too comfortable. When was the last time any of us took a risk, a big risk, for our faith. For the next four weeks, we'll learn it really means to step out of the boat.

Another storm

Perhaps the skies were darkening as the disciples climbed into the boat. Some were experienced fishermen and knew how quickly ferocious storms could form over the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps they even thought about the time not long before when they had awakened Jesus to save them from a storm (Matthew 8:23-27). He had, of course, saved them, calming the storm and chastising the disciples for their “little faith” (*oligopistos* in the Greek).

But, most likely, their minds were consumed with what they had just experienced. Just hours before, on a remote shore, Jesus had miraculously fed a huge throng. In front of their own eyes, he had taken five loaves of bread and two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, broken the bread . . . and fed thousands. Then, Jesus had quickly sent the disciples on ahead, instructing them to get into the boat and head out across the sea while he headed into the hills to be alone and to pray.

Jesus had never sent them ahead of him before. He had always been with them, there to protect and to lead. But now they were in the boat alone, heading across the sea in a growing storm, buffeted by stronger and stronger headwinds, the boat tortured by higher and higher waves. Shortly before dawn, the disciples looked out across the sea and saw a shocking and, indeed, terrifying sight – Jesus was walking toward them across the surface of the sea.

The Purpose of Matthew's Gospel

Everyone who writes anything does so with a purpose. It might be to inform or to persuade. It might be to get a good grade or create a record of what happened. Every writer brings not only a purpose, but a point of view. This was no less true of the Gospel writers than it is any other author. Scripture is, to use Paul's phrase, “God-breathed,” but it is also the work of human authors. Thus, an important question is, “What can we know about Matthew's purpose in writing?”

Matthew was Jewish and he wrote for a Jewish audience, which explains the lengthy Jewish genealogy that opens his Gospel. Matthew wrote his gospel late in his own life, as long as forty or more years after Jesus' death and resurrection in 30AD. Matthew had Mark's Gospel to work from, in addition to his own recollections and other sources. At times, Matthew copied Mark word-for-word, but at other times modified Mark's account, as in today's story. Why include Peter's stepping out of the boat when Mark does not?

It seems virtually certain that Matthew wrote for a community of Jewish-Christians. He went so far as to avoid the phrase, ‘kingdom of God,’ for fear that the word “God” might offend those Jews who would not utter God's name in any form. Instead, Matthew uses “kingdom of heaven.” He painstakingly portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecies and expectations.

When we read a story like today's, we can be comforted knowing that it was written to bolster the faith of Christians who struggled with doubts and fears just like our own. Matthew tells the story in this way so that his community would be strengthened in their faith, so that they would understand who it is they worshipped. Matthew wanted them to take risks, to step out of the boat, and to keep their eyes focused upon Jesus.

This story begs us to use our imaginations. Perhaps this is why so much of the Bible is stories. We can put ourselves in the story in a way that we could never engage an essay on doctrine. Who wouldn't be a little anxious about climbing into the boat without Jesus? There is no indication that Jesus gave the disciples any instruction about what he wanted them to do when they reached the other side of the sea. Who wouldn't be scared as the sea rose and the boat struggled? Who wouldn't be terrified to look over the side of the boat and see someone, anyone, walking on the water? Who might not think it's a ghost or at least an hallucination? Nobody can walk on water . . . or can they?

Would I respond as Peter did? That is the question. Would I get out of the boat? Peter did. He heard Jesus call out in the wind and identify himself. He heard Jesus tell them all to set aside their fear, to "take courage." Peter yelled out that if Jesus called him, Peter would walk out to him. And when Jesus said, "Come," Peter climbed over the side of the boat. When he got out there, for at least a few moments Peter walked on the surface of the water himself. But then the wind hit his face. Perhaps he realized what he was doing. Regardless, he looked toward the storm and away from Jesus – and sank like a rock. Thrusting his hand upward, Peter cried out "Save me." And Jesus did. But he also rebuked Peter for his "little faith," *oligopistos*.¹ Pointedly, Jesus asked Peter, "Why did you doubt?"

A story for the church

It isn't difficult to see why Matthew tells us the story in this way. He is writing to a post-resurrection church that can't see Jesus and touch Jesus as the disciples had years before. The disciples had climbed into the boat without Jesus beside them in the same way he always had. They felt alone but they weren't. Jesus was still their Lord, coming to them in the most surprising way. Matthew's community might feel alone, but they weren't alone. Jesus would come to these Christians also, in the most surprising ways.

In response to Jesus' call, Peter climbs out. He responds to Jesus in trust, in faith. But about as soon as he gets out, he takes his eyes off Jesus and sees the storm instead and sinks. Would it have been possible for Peter to have faith so strong that he could walk on water all the way to Jesus? I don't know. All I know is that Peter's faith was fragile, as is my own. It is far too easy, too human, to see the storm and discover that our faith has fled us, replaced by doubts and fears. But, Jesus was there to save Peter and is here to save us, to grasp our outstretched hands and pull us to safety. Surely, Matthew wants us to see all this in his telling of the story.

Despite Peter's sinking, notice one thing in the story. Peter *does* walk on water. He doesn't climb over the side and slip between the waves. He gets out of the boat and, at least for a moment, walks until he sees the wind. How that moment must have seemed to Peter. When he looked back on it, how did he feel? What thoughts ran through his brain? We can't know, but we can know this – if Peter had not gotten out of the boat, he could never have walked on water at all. And this business of water-walking is what we talk about for the next few weeks.²

Getting out of the boat

When Jesus sent the disciples on alone, he knew that he would not always be with them as he was then. He would be with them always in another way, a different way. They would no longer be able to rely on their five senses for their faith in Jesus. They would have to learn that faith is about being certain of what we can't see (Hebrews 11:1). They would have to grow in ways that they couldn't even imagine at the time.

When Peter stepped out of the boat, he took a risk. It was only by taking a risk that he was able to walk on water at all, if even only for a few moments. We don't often think of our faith as being about risk-taking. We live in a world that makes it seem easy, without risk, to be a Christian – but that is an appealing lie. Being a Christian is risk free only so long as we don't take it too seriously, don't let our faith truly shape our priorities and agendas. Once we step forward to admit and to proclaim that Jesus is Lord of all creation, much less our own lives, we embark on a journey that is all about taking risks, about stepping out of the boat ourselves.

¹Matthew would use this word, *oligopistos*, again in the final passage before Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Matthew only uses the word to describe the weak faith of believers, never unbelievers.

²The inspiration for this series is a recent book by John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. It is my September book recommendation. I highly recommend it. Ortberg is a pleasure to read and has an important message in this book.

Daily Bible Readings

(more from Matthew's Gospel)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 8:23-27 Jesus stills the storm.</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 14:1-21 The death of John the Baptist and the feeding of the five thousand.</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 16:5-12 Jesus is dismayed by the disciples' lack of faith and understanding (see verse 8).</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 16:13-28 Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah – but notice what happens next.</p>
<p>Day 5 Matthew 26:69-75 Peter is given another opportunity to walk on water, but doesn't even try to get out of the boat.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

September Book Recommendation

If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat, by John Ortberg

A passionate disciple of Jesus Christ lives a life built upon trusting God and acting on that trust. That means being willing to take risks, to leave our spiritual comfort zone. In this book, John Ortberg invites us to consider the incredible potential that awaits us outside our comfort zone. Peter stepped out of the boat when his Lord said "Come." Will we?

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore

Getting Out of the Boat

This sermon and teaching series continues through October 16.

We hope you'll join us in Wesley Hall at 9:30 as Scott Engle takes a closer look at what it means to be a risk-taking Christian. Also, Debbie Lyons will be leading a discussion oriented class at 11:00. This series will be based on John Ortberg's book and will challenge our all-too-comfortable Christianity. Discover the incredible potential that awaits us if we are only willing to risk it all.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by talking about today's story. What do you find most surprising in the story? Why do you think that Matthew included the story of Peter when Mark and Luke did not? Why do you think Peter couldn't keep his eyes on Jesus after he stepped out of the boat? How is this a story of our own Christian walk, the choices and salvation offered us all? What lessons can we take from this brief story?

In his book, John Ortberg poses a few questions for us:

- "What's your boat? Where is fear or comfort keeping you from trusting God?"
- "In what area do you need discernment to know if you're really being called to get out of the boat?"
- "What's one risk you can take in your life that could help your faith to grow? Might you stand up for a value you believe during a rough conversation? Might you express affection even though it may be hard for you?"
- "What's one failure from your past that haunts you? What trusted friend can you share it with as a step to robbing it of its power?"
- "Where are you in relation to Jesus these days? Huddled in the boat? One leg out? Walking on water?"