

Year A Proper 19 Warning: walking on water leads to...sinking Matt 14 vv22 to 33

Today we hear about Jesus walking on the water, Peter trying to do the same, sinking, and being rescued by his Lord.

People hear this story and think it says, “If you have doubt, you will fail. If you have faith in Jesus, you can do anything. With God, all things are possible.” That is true – with God all things are possible – but that is not what this story is trying to teach us.

Matthew does not want us to look at Peter walking on the water and think, “Wow, with God – all things are possible. Peter walked on water until he doubted and then Jesus rescued him.” If you read the story carefully, it wasn’t doubt that sunk Peter. Peter got scared at the wind and waves raging around him, lost his focus, and sank. So, you might think that means we just need to keep our faith, keep our eye on Jesus, and everything will be fine. Again – this may be true but, Scripture is not about us – it is about God and God’s kingdom...God’s desire for right relationship with all of God’s creation. Remember, we are not to take Scripture and fit it into our lives. We are to take our lives and fit them into Scripture. In other words, hearing the story of our salvation is our opportunity to learn something about God and God’s kingdom and how to then adjust our lives to live according to life God’s ways in God’s kingdom.

You see, Peter doubted long before he sank. When the disciples first saw Jesus walking towards them on the water, they were terrified because they knew no human could do that. So, Jesus spoke to them to reassure them that it was him and not some supernatural creature come to harm them. They saw their Lord and they heard their Lord but Peter didn’t trust what he was seeing and hearing.

That was when Peter was filled with doubt. He did not trust the word that his Lord was speaking to him. Peter heard the voice of his Lord speaking familiar words – Do not be afraid. It is I...a very deliberate echo of the great “I Am” that God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. “When the people ask me who my God is”, Moses said, “what should I tell them?” and God said “I AM”. Words that Peter would have known and held close to his heart. Yet he doubted. And because of his doubt, Peter put his God to the test. He said, “If it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water.”

It was not faith that got Peter out of the boat. It was doubt. It was doubt that got Peter to try to walk on water just like Jesus. “If it is you,” he said, “tell me to come to you on the water.” If you hear cute phrases like, “If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat,” remember, Peter’s walking on water is not a good thing in this story – he doubted his Lord, he tested his Lord.

Peter is not a shining example of faith in this story – doubting and testing. So, if Peter doesn’t look so good in this story, why is this story even in here? Because it’s not about Peter. We like to make this story about us by putting ourselves in Peter’s shoes – or, rather, sandals. We could walk on water, too, we think. We just need faith without doubt. Again...that is not what this story is about. This story is not about Peter. It’s about Jesus.

Peter is not the first – and certainly not the last – to test God.

If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the top of the temple and let the angels catch you. Those were the taunts of Satan testing Jesus in the wilderness but, that was not the end of the testing. If you are the Son of God, come down off the cross and save yourself –

these were the taunts of the unbelieving power figures of Israel who had arranged to have Jesus nailed to that cross. And, in response to these taunting tests Jesus said, “No. No – because I AM the Son of God, I’m staying on this cross. Because I AM the Son of God, I will not turn these stones into bread. Because I AM the Son of God, I will not jump off the temple and make the angels catch me.”

But then we have Peter – in a horrifying echo of the tests and the taunts of Satan and the worldly powers Peter says, “Jesus, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you on the water” and Jesus says, “Okay wise guy, come.” Peter gets out of the boat and he sinks. “Of course you sank, Peter, you’re not God. I told you to get in the boat. I was coming to you.”

Why did Jesus say yes to Peter this time? Jesus knew Peter was going to sink and that he’d have to save him. Why did Jesus say yes to him? He certainly didn’t always say yes to Peter. When Peter proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of the Living God and Jesus explained that that meant he had to go to Jerusalem and die, Peter took Jesus by the shoulders and said, “No, you mustn’t do that – you mustn’t die.” Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me Satan. I won’t do what you want me to do.” Jesus had no problem saying no to Peter that time.

So when does Jesus say “yes” to being tested and when does he say “no”? Well, in every case, Jesus is doing the same thing – he is holding firmly to the truth that he is the Son of God and he is holding firmly to the truth that God has a plan for salvation and he is a part of that plan.

And so, the Son of God must say no to the devil testing him in the wilderness and the Son of God must say no to the people taunting him to get him to come down off the cross.

That would have changed who Jesus was. It would have changed his moral fiber – it would have made him less than perfect – compromising his morals in order to quiet the taunting.

And it would have changed God's plan to save us. Jesus has always been a part of that plan.

But the Son of God will say "yes" to his followers seeking reassurance. He said yes to Peter – "yes, walk to me on the water". And he said yes to Thomas. "Yes, Thomas. I will show you my wounds". But each time, Jesus gently chastised them..."Why did you doubt?" he asked them. Not, "Why did you doubt and then sink?" but rather, "Why did you doubt and test me in the first place?"

There have been quite a few times when I have been praying and had a thought – an answer – pop into my head but then I wonder, "Was that God speaking to me or was that my own voice I heard?" Perhaps you've had this same sort of experience. And so I ask for reassurance: "God, if that really was you, please let me know somehow."

God knows we are human and that we will question him sometimes; we will doubt him sometimes; we will feel the need to ask for reassurance. That's normal. The almighty God who can walk on water and calm raging storms will reassure us because the almighty God is also the God of love, patience, and forgiveness. But God wants us to get to the place in our relationship with him when he no longer needs to say to us, "Why did you doubt?"

Through the prophet, Jeremiah, God says there will come a day when people will no longer teach one another or say to each other "Know the Lord" for they will all

know Him (Jer.31:31-34). This story shows us our all-powerful God, ruler of all creation who yet desires a personal loving relationship with the creation he caused to be. We see that life in God's kingdom with this almighty God of love is a life of trust, faith in the relationship offered to us. We can find hope in the certainty of God's faithfulness to us and to God's promises – we will be transformed...the world will be transformed. The despair of the world, looking around and seeing seemingly unsolvable massive problems like violence, hatred, poverty, let alone the never-ending stream of issues in our own lives...the despair this causes will be overcome by the God who teaches us we can hope because God will come through for us and for the world. Joseph's despair in being left for dead in a pit in the desert transformed into hope by a God who uses even our brokenness to move closer to the fulfillment of his promises. The despair of insurmountable division and differences transformed into hope by the God who erases lines between us by the love brought by the beautiful feet of the messengers announcing good news for all who will turn and believe. The despair of sinking in life's messes transformed into hope by the God who reaches out to us even as we turn away.

There will come a time when we do not doubt, when we don't need reassurance, when we don't wonder, "Was that God's voice I heard?" We will just know. We will hear the words of Jesus and we will trust the words of Jesus – Do not be afraid...I AM.