

Introductory

This text has parallels in Mark (6: 45-53) and probably John (6: 15-21). In all three accounts, this incident takes place right after the Feeding of the Multitude. All three accounts are followed by different things. In LSB, the Mark account is appointed for Proper 12B. In LW, this Matthew account is the reading for Pentecost 12A.

None of the accounts is appointed to be read in the TLH one-year lectionary. The main thing about this pericope is that Jesus is able to miraculously walk on water. Peter also miraculously walks on water, but only for a short time. Generally, and here, the content of a sermon should contain more of Jesus and less of everybody else. So, what gives?

Talking about Peter's on-again off-again faith is easy. We should instead talk a lot more about Jesus than is generally done when preaching on this text and a lot less about Peter. Talk about Peter will tend to focus on his sin or weakness of "little faith," the Law, while talk about Jesus will tend to focus on Him as miracle-doer and Savior, the Gospel.

What we have before us this week is an interesting, exciting, dramatic story, one that offers strong anecdotal evidence for the veracity of the axiom that "fact is stranger than fiction." You can't make this stuff up. If you did, nobody would believe you! But it should not surprise us that God is like that and does things like this. He is, after all, God.

One of the things that annoys me about modern preaching is that we can take a story like this and make it boring, dull, and predictable. Those are not good characteristics for a sermon to have. We should strive to place the listeners on that boat, in that storm, on that night. Make them feel the rocking of the boat, hear the crash of the thunder, and the like.

Make the hearers feel the sensation of drowning, and the fear that comes with that sensation, one that most people have had. Make them feel scared, like the disciples felt scared, when something out of your favorite horror movie seems to be approaching them in the night, and the relief that they felt when they realized that it was Jesus.

It may be well to review vocabulary words like faith, belief, and trust, words that mean the same thing, and that are translated from one Greek word. Knowing that will help them to better understand the Bible. English has by far the largest vocabulary of any, so it is not surprising that we have at least three words that mean the same thing.

While it may be appropriate to point out some obvious similarities here between Peter and us, it is not appropriate to make this pericope into an allegory about faith and the lack thereof. While we can learn about that from this and other incidents, the events here are not intended primarily to be a morality lesson for the Christian who struggles with faith.

I don't know how much time you want to spend talking about the false prophets who deny this and other miracles. When I talk about them, I generally choose to briefly mock them and then move on. Those who contend that Jesus was just walking along the shore in a couple of feet of water ignore the fact that they were "many stadia" from shore, et al.

I will probably spend no time mocking on this particular Sunday. I and my people are fully aware of those out there who think this is just a more profound version of the Van der Waals effect. They work with those people, and know that their biggest problem is their pastors, who are taught things at seminary, and that's the long and short of that.

The Context flows from where we have been the last several weeks. The immediate context is after the Feeding of the Multitude, probably on the same day. The location of this incident is near to that of the Feeding, on the north end of the Sea of Galilee, where the Jordan River flows into it. Sudden storms like this were common in that sea.

Textual Notes

22. Jesus tells the disciples to get into the boat. He does not tell them to do that, as would be expected, by using a verb in the imperative (command) mood. Instead, Matthew tells us that Jesus "ἠνάγκασεν τοὺς μαθητὰς ἐμβῆναι εἰς τὸ πλοῖον – compelled them to enter the boat." It is an aorist active indicative verb, and it occurs eight other times in the NT.

Perusing those other occurrences, we note that it is used when one is trying to convince another to do something. This is noteworthy because it indicates that the disciples had to be almost talked into getting into the boat, which implies that they really didn't want to get into the boat, which raises the question of *why* the hesitancy on their part to do that.

Barclay also notes the hesitancy and thinks that it has to do with the fluid but fomenting political situation at that time and that place. He points out that "John tells us that after the feeding of the multitude, the crowd wished to come and to make him a king by force (*John* 6:15)." This assumes that the feeding in John is the same as the one in Matthew.

He continues, "There was a surge of popular acclamation, and in the excited state of Palestine a revolution might well have there and then begun." He calls it a "dangerous situation," and concludes that "Jesus sent away His disciples because a situation had arisen with which he could best deal alone," and best without them (p. 104).

That may be plausible, and there I something to it, but we note that Jesus "deal(t) with" the desire of the people to make Him a Bread King" by withdrawing to the mountains by

Himself to pray, meaning that He did not actually deal with it. And surely, where He was going, He could have taken the others with Him, as He often does, but He does not.

While acknowledging the Bread King Movement – and it is noteworthy that Matthew does not even bother to mention it – the idea that the disciples were reticent to get into the boat because they wanted to be involved in that movement is maybe not the best explanation. There may be more plausible explanations for their hesitancy.

It is entirely possible that the disciples simply wanted to do what they usually did when Jesus goes off to pray; They wanted to go with Him. That would have been the norm, to stay with Jesus, not to leave Him. On a very basic human level, Jesus was part of their group, and the unwritten rules of group clearly state that the group always stays together.

This group almost always does just that, and the writers make that abundantly clear in many places. Almost always, He is accompanied by the Twelve, usually by others, and when He breaks three of them off, we hear about it. Here, Matthew finds several ways to tell us that Jesus was “alone,” i.e. away from the group because that was not the norm.

It is also entirely possible that these fishermen, who were familiar with the area, could have read the signs of impending bad weather and seen that this was not a good time to be on the water. That would explain why Jesus has to convince them to get into the boat, and that they did actually board the boat may be seen as a mark of their faith in Him.

Spoiler alert! If we read ahead, we see that a storm does come, and it’s a doozie! Since that storm does in fact come, we may reasonably conclude that it was preceded by signs of a coming storm, which these men – several are sailors – would have seen. That being the case, Jesus also would have seen those signs, yet He made them get into the boat.

Jesus sent them out onto the sea *knowing* that the storm would come, *knowing* that the boat would be in trouble, *knowing* that He would save them from the storm. This would have Jesus putting them in danger so that He could rescue them. But it almost smacks of Jesus lobbing Himself a softball, but such a thing would not be without precedent.

Sort of like with Job, the OT text for the day. There, He not only puts Job in danger, but strips him of all that is good in his life. Job wants to know why, and his friends try to get a grasp on it, and then God weighs in with the answer, including the series of rhetorical questions we hear today. In the end, God restores all the good things, and then some.

The first few verses of Exodus 14 lay out God’s tactical plan to destroy Pharaoh and his armies, while getting glory for Himself. He tells Moses to tell Israel to go to a certain spot for this express purpose,

For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are entangled in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh...

And you know how that story ends. In that case, God deliberately put Israel in a tough spot for the express purpose of destroying the army of Pharaoh and getting glory for Himself. In the same way, Jesus may in this pericope have been putting the disciples in a tough spot so that He could do what He does. Let's see how this thing plays out.

Nevertheless, they climbed into the boat, “προάγειν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ πέραν – to go before Him to the other side” of the Sea of Galilee, while Jesus “ἀπολύσῃ – dismissed” the crowd. “The verb ἀπολύσῃ – to dismiss” is used in a variety of contexts; divorce, release of prisoners, and giving a group permission to leave, which is what Jesus is doing here.

The aorist subjunctive form of the verb indicates that the dismissing will be a one-time, simple act done at some unspecified time in the future. He is telling them to get into the boat, and that He is going to dismiss the crowd, but He's not saying exactly when He will dismiss the crowd, but just get into the boat, away from the action.

23. Jesus had told the disciples that He would dismiss the crowds, and He does. And after “ἀπολύσας – dismissing” the crowds, Jesus went up the unnamed mountain to pray. Matthew tells us that He went up on the mountain “κατ' ἰδίαν – by Himself” and that He was up there “μόνος – alone.” And it was evening, and He was there to pray.

That verb translated “to pray” is προσεύξασθαι, and it is in the aorist middle infinitive form of the verb. In the infinitive, the aorist tense indicates focus on the action, not on the connection of the person to that action. The action being focused on here is prayer, the solitary man on the mountain alone and praying, and the Apostles on the water.

Which is not to say that Jesus is not involved – clearly, He is – but it is to say that for Matthew the noteworthy thing here is that prayer is taking place. Given what is about to happen next, and that most of the story is about what happens on the sea, maybe Matthew – who was there – finds it odd that Jesus would be praying when action was needed.

24. Matthew shifts us to that scene where action is needed, from land and the mountain, from the crowd and the praying Jesus, to the sea and the boat and the men in the boat. Writers will often use scene shift to help keep the story interesting, and preachers can do the same. Sometimes you come back to the scene that you have left, but not this time.

Matthew describes the situation on the boat. He does not tell us exactly how far the boat is from land, but He speaks of the boat “ἤδη σταδίου πολλοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς ἀπεῖχεν – being a great number of stadia from the land.” A stadia is about 160m, and the adjective means that there were a lot of them, something like, “they were a long way from shore.”

The import of that information, of course, is to tell us that the simple solution to the problem that will soon become evident, to just turn back to the port of origin or plow through to the port of destination, is not in this case going to be available. They are stuck in the middle of the sea with no hope of reaching any dry land any time soon.

Oh, and a storm came up. The boat is said to be “βασανιζόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν κυμάτων, ἣν γὰρ ἐναντίος ὁ ἄνεμος – moved around by the waves, and the wind was opposed.” A quick word study of βασανίζω will reveal that the verb has a much deeper meaning than “buffet” (who uses that word?) of many translations. It was bad. It was very bad.

The waves are almost seen in a personified way as actively and deliberately “tormenting” the boat and her contents. The present active participle form of the verb indicates that the torment was continual, and if you’ve ever been on a boat in those circumstances, then you know how that feels. It’s terrifying, you want it to stop, but they just keep coming.

The preposition ὑπὸ followed by a noun in the genitive case indicates “by, denoting the agent or cause” (Shorter BAG); the wind is the cause of their troubles. If you live in the desert, don’t cross the Mississippi River several times each week, don’t ride bikes along it several times each summer, or an ocean, then you don’t know where waves come from.

Wind makes waves. When the wind is not blowing, the water is calm. When a wind comes up, the harder the wind, the larger the waves. And besides that, the wind was against them. The word has connotations of opposition, opposite, of an enemy; they are on a sailing vessel, and the wind is against them, and there’s no tack available for that.

The engine-powered vessel is a very recent development. For most of human history boats have been powered by the wind, and occasionally by men with oars. By “taking the right tack,” using the rudder and angle of sails to the wind, sailors can do remarkable – to me – things, seeming almost able to make a ship go against the wind. But they can’t.

It’s the one thing that not even the best sailor can do; make a sailing ship go against the wind, and in the kind of storm described here, oars would have been useless as well. These men in this boat are at the mercy of the wind to blow them wherever it will, and the Sea is finite, and at some point, they will come to shore, and then comes the crash.

Tom Clancy has taught us much, and one of the things that he has taught us is that 3:00 in the morning is the time when men are at their lowest state of alertness. That’s a good time to attack a thing to be attacked, and maybe a good time for an unnamed man to come walking across the sea towards this distressed boat, with perfect timing.

The night watch was divided into four three-hour shifts. What happens next happens “τετάρτη δὲ φυλακῇ τῆς νυκτὸς – in the fourth guard,” between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. At that time, “ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτοὺς περιπατῶν ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν – He came towards them walking on the Sea,” and there is no indication that this is anything other than a miracle.

He’s not “to” them, but He’s moving “towards” them. The preposition of movement, “πρὸς” is followed by a noun in the accusative case; motion towards them, *but He’s not there yet*. He has moved from the mountain to the sea by foot, just a man taking a journey to see His friends, who are in a boat. Let’s see where He’s going with this.

26. So we're in the wee hours of the morning, on a doomed boat, and "οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης περιπατοῦντα – the disciples saw Him upon the sea." The preposition followed by the noun in the genitive case places Him on top of the water, yes, like the Van der Waals effect, except that it's a man, not a paper clip or a leaf.

The reaction of the disciples when they saw him, is that "ἐταράχθησαν – they were extremely upset." It's an aorist passive indicative verb form, something was upsetting them. Do a word study and note the other occurrences of that verb, and then tell some of them to your hearers to communicate the level of agitation that these men were feeling.

Now they speak "λέγοντες ὅτι Φάντασμα ἐστίν, καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ φόβου ἔκραζαν – saying that it 'is a ghost,' and they cried out in fear." Their best explanation was that this must be a ghost or apparition. This is great stuff, especially for the youngsters. Come on! We're talking about ghosts! And they're walking on water! And it's the middle of the night!

It is out of fear that the men in the boat cried out, an aorist active indicative, a one-time act, focus on the act, and who can blame them. They saw what they saw, they felt the raw emotion of fear that would come from seeing what they saw, and it does not say what they said, but we can well imagine that it may have just been to scream like a girl.

How scared does a man have to be before he lets other men see that he is scared? And how scared does that man have to be before he verbalizes it? And remember that this is not these men's first time to the rodeo, or in this case first time on the sea, in a boat, at night, in bad weather, but in perfect unison they screamed like a girl.

What kinds of things make a person so scared that he screams like a girl? Not many, really. Rides at the fair or the theme park sometimes makes us scream out in fear. Being surprised by a stranger at night may make you scream out in fear, or at least start. Seeing somebody walking on water during a storm at night would be another thing.

If you make people feel things, then you are creating pathos in the hearer, and it's a good thing to create pathos in the hearer. Some of the Lutherans don't like emotion. Aristotle talks about pathos as the third of three modes of persuasion, and God feels emotion all the time, and He also creates pathos in others. How often? All the time.

27. Then Jesus spoke, "Θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε – cheer up, I am, stop being afraid." The verb that begins the sentence occurs seven times in the NT, each time when things look bad but are about to get good. He follows up that word of encouragement with the reason *why* they should expect good things to happen, "ἐγὼ εἰμι."

To translate this predicate nominative "it is me" is just poor grammar, and "it is I" is correct grammar, but does not capture the significance of Jesus saying, "ἐγὼ εἰμι," God's personal name. He says that all the time in John, often with riotous results, but not so much in Matthew. It's a double entendre; it is indeed Jesus, and Jesus is indeed God.

It goes without saying that the translations who have Jesus telling them not to be afraid are missing the meaning of “μή φοβεῖσθε.” When a verb in the present imperative form is preceded by μή, it is *not* a prohibition to start fearing. It is rather a command to *stop an action already being engaged in* (FGG 219). Clearly, they are already engaged in the act.

28. To that “ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν Κύριε – Peter responds to Him, saying ‘Lord,’” a confession of and agreeing to His assertion that He is God, as well as being present. Peter then commands or maybe requests of Jesus “εἰ σὺ εἶ, κέλευσόν με ἐλθεῖν πρὸς σὲ ἐπὶ τὰ ὕδατα – if it’s you, command me to come to you on the water.”

What kind of a man is even thinking about leaving a perfectly good boat, even one that’s being abused by the waves, to walk on water? Peter, that’s what kind of a man. A good true story includes character development, and as we continue to learn from this true story, we see that not all people are the same, and Peter is a very interesting person.

29. Jesus is amenable to Peter’s suggestion; “εἶπεν Ἐλθέ. καὶ καταβάς ἀπὸ τοῦ πλοίου Πέτρος περιεπάτησεν ἐπὶ τὰ ὕδατα καὶ ἦλθεν πρὸς τὸν Ἰησοῦν – He said ‘come’ and coming down from the boat, Peter walked on the water, and came towards Jesus.” The preposition followed by a noun in the Nominative case indicates – still – motion towards.

It’s important to note that the same verb is used for Jesus walking on water and for Peter walking on water, but they are different verb forms. Jesus is said to walking with a participle; continuous act, while Peter is walking on water with an aorist, not continuous act, and as we’ll see, his walking on water lasts only for a very short time.

30. He got out of the boat, but then “βλέπων δὲ τὸν ἄνεμον ἐφοβήθη – seeing the mighty wind,” and remembering who he was, he became afraid. It was an act of faith for Peter to climb down out of that perfectly good boat and onto that raging water, and it’s what he sees with his eyes that cause fear to come upon him, and then he began to sink.

When he perceived himself to be sinking, “ἄρξάμενος καταποντίζεσθαι ἔκραξεν λέγων Κύριε, σῶσόν με – having begun to sink, he cried out ‘Lord, save me.’” Once again, we hear Peter’s confession of faith, and his confidence that Jesus is able to save him. Peter believes, but still fears, and still has a problem with weak faith, like all Christians.

This is a dramatic scene, and we should not eliminate the drama from it when we retell it. Think of a baby’s first steps, or that scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the one when Indy and his father are almost to the place where the grail is kept and there’s a cliff with a deep drop-off, and Indy has to sort of take a step of faith into nothingness.

If you tell the story of Peter walking on water well, using similes that are familiar to you and your hearer, you will find yourself leaning forward slightly, and if you are leaning forward slightly then maybe so are the hearers. Cause them to feel what Peter and the rest are feeling in the boat, on the water, and how does it feel when Peter begins to sink.

31. Jesus responds to Peter's request with an action; "Ἰησοῦς ἐκτείνας τὴν χεῖρα ἐπέλαβετο αὐτοῦ - Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him," effectively stopping his sinking into the water. The verb is ἐπέλαβετο, the aorist middle indicative form of ἐπιλαμβάνομαι, which can mean grabbing on to in a hostile manner, or not

But when the verb is used in the passive voice, it means grabbing on to help somebody, like here, or like that scene later on in *The Last Crusade* when Indy goes over the cliff in the tank, but hangs on to some branches, and finally somebody (I don't remember who) pulls him up. Maybe his father. Jesus grabs on to the Rock, who is sinking like one.

Then He speaks to Peter, saying "Ὀλιγόπιστε, εἰς τί ἐδίστασας – you of little faith, why did you doubt?" He addressed Peter in the rare vocative case, drawing attention to the smallness of his faith, perhaps expressing disappointment that he was so close...The word speaks to the qualitatively small amount of faith – there is some, but not enough.

Rare, but very well-known, this NT vocative appears only six times in the entire NT. The meaning is clear here and so is it in the other five places. He calls them that at times when their faith should have been the largest, like earlier in Matthew (8), where they were in a storm, afraid of sinking, right before He stilled the storm.

Jesus rhetorically and emphatically asks Peter why he "wavered" or "doubted." The word "doubt" or "hesitate" occurs only here and in Matthew 28:17, right before the Ascension. There, the word is paired with "worship," and the companion here is "faith." Those may seem like odd pairings, but they are the woof and wharf of the Christian walk.

MM and BAG seem to think that the word has connotations of inward uncertainties manifest in outward hesitancy, a great description of what has just happened to Peter. Theologically speaking, Peter was able to walk on water at the command of Jesus, but when he looked away from Jesus and looked at the winds, he did not do so well.

32. Where do you go from there? You get Peter back into the boat, and then – He's done this before – He stills the storm "καὶ ἀναβάντων αὐτῶν εἰς τὸ πλοῖον ἐκόπασεν ὁ ἄνεμος – and they entered into the boat, and the wind stopped." Matthew does not say that Jesus miraculously made the wind to stop, but the timing is curious, to say the least.

Neither I nor Pat Robertson can, by our command, stop the winds of the storm, the differentiating mark between Pat and me being that I know that I can't, and he doesn't. The One who created wind surely has authority over that part of His creation also, and it would be an easy thing for Him to stop the wind, and He has already done it once.

The emphasis in this text is on the clear miracle of Jesus – and for a brief time Peter – walking on water, and that's the emphasis that I will stick to in preaching and teaching this text. Last week, a lot of preachers probably made the feeding of the 5,000 entirely into a metaphor, and this week will do the same, but don't do that. He walked on water.

33. We now move back into the boat, where the subject is those who had stayed in the boat, who had not doubted or wavered, and who had not challenged Jesus to cause them to walk on water, who had perhaps even accepted that it was Jesus, from whom they had even come to expect such shenanigans. Not all Apostles are the same.

Of them, it is said that “προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ λέγοντες Ἀληθῶς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς εἶ - they worshipped Him, saying, ‘truly you are the Son of God.’” With their actions – going down on the knee, and with their words – calling Him what they did, they show themselves to be believers in Jesus; Christians. The One Who can do that, is that.

Law/Gospel

Drowning/Saved – Weighed down by sin, we are drowning and dying. Jesus comes through the stormy sea of life and saves us. He puts the shoe on the other foot, in baptism drowning the Old Adam and rising us up to new life.

Unbelief/Belief – The natural man does not and cannot believe in the One True God. Through Word and Sacrament, that God works faith, “the gift of God, not of works,” in that natural man so that we believe and are saved.

Death/Life – Violent storms bring with them sudden death, and if you don’t die in a storm, then you will die in another way, but we all die. Jesus brings life to people who are most definitely going to die.

Sermon Titles

Peter the Rock Sinks Like One

Hymns

Jesus Savior Pilot Me – LSB 715

Eternal Father, Strong to Save – LSB 717

On Eagles’ Wings – LSB 727

Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness – LSB 849

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