

Introductory

This account has a parallel in Matthew (14:22-33) and in John (6:15-21). None of those texts are appointed to be read in the TLH one-year lectionary. This text is not appointed in the LW three – year lectionary, but the Matthew text is appointed for Pentecost 12A in LW. In LSB, the Matthew text is appointed to be read on Proper 14A, so we get walking on water twice in three years.

In all three accounts, this incident takes place right after the Feeding of the Multitude. As has been noted on other occasions, Matthew has Jesus feeding five thousand, then a little while later four thousand. Those are clearly different feedings, and Jesus may well have fed other groups at other times. But here, the three accounts are clearly parallel, talking about the same sequence of events.

Don't be too quick to rush to allegorize this pericope. The main thing here is that Jesus is able to miraculously walk on water. As a general rule, the content of a sermon should contain more about Jesus and less of everybody else. It's incredible how many sermons on the Matthew text focus almost exclusively on Peter and his teetering faith, and oh, by the way, Jesus walked on water.

That's why Mark mentions neither the walking of Peter nor his conversation with Jesus. It's not about Peter and his faith or lack thereof. It's about the miracle of Jesus. People are familiar with this incident, and mostly due to Sunday School it has become firmly ensconced in the vernacular; if you talk about somebody walking on water, everybody knows the reference.

What we have before us this week is an interesting, exciting, dramatic and perhaps humorous 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 created nature, and He rules over it.

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, on that night, and the drama of it all. Make them feel the rocking of the boat, and hear the blowing of the wind, things with which they are familiar.

Midwesterners especially are especially familiar with wind and with the danger that comes with travel by sea. East Coasters will probably be more familiar with sailing. 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.

Put them into Jesus' sandals. He who was truly and fully man just wanted to get a break far from the maddening crowd, a little respite from the frenzy of being Jesus. When He is able to do that, it is only for a short period, and invariably His rest is to be interrupted by people with needs. Who among us does not understand that concept? Laymen have vacations and days interrupted too.

The context here flows from where we have seen the last several weeks. The immediate context is after the Feeding of the Multitude, probably on the same day. The location is very near to that of the Feeding, on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, where the Jordan River flows into it. As the story unfolds, we find ourselves too far out in that Sea, a place notorious for nasty weather.

Textual Notes

45. Following the Feeding, Jesus “εὐθὺς ἠνάγκασεν τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ ἐμβῆναι εἰς τὸ πλοῖον – Immediately compelled His disciples to get into the boat.” The verb here is not in the imperative (command) mood, but it is an aorist. This is noteworthy because it indicates that the disciples did not want to get into the boat, and maybe they had to be talked into getting into it by Jesus.

Why would that be? Why would these men not want to get into the boat? In his Matthew commentary, Barclay also notes their hesitancy to get into the boat and thinks that it has to do with the fluid but fomenting political situation at that time and that place. He thinks that if they would have stayed in that place, the crowd might be trending towards insurrection. 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). 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 he then concludes that “Jesus sent away His disciples because a situation had arisen with which he could best deal alone, and in which he did not wish them to become involved” (p. 104). That may be a plausible explanation, but we note that Jesus did not actually deal with the situation, but instead He withdrew from it, going off to pray.

In order to understand where Barclay is coming from, we need to take a look at John's more full account of this incident. It is from John, and not from the synoptics, that we get the information about the attempts to make Jesus into a “bread king” after the miraculous feeding, the “dangerous situation” to which Barclay refers. But just how dangerous was this situation, really?

What John adds to the conversation is that when the crowds saw the miracle, they hailed Jesus as “ὁ προφήτης ὁ ἐρχόμενος εἰς τὸν κόσμον – The Prophet who is coming into the world.” There have been and are prophets, and then there is The Prophet. The capitalization (me) and the definite article (the Bible) means that they are proclaiming Jesus to be Messiah, a “dangerous situation.”

John then relates how Jesus “γνοὺς ὅτι μέλλουσιν ἔρχεσθαι καὶ ἀρπάζειν αὐτὸν ἵνα ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα – knew they were about to come to seize Him, so that they might make Him king,” Jesus, who knew men, could perceive what was going on with the crowd, and the word “seize” occurs fourteen times in the NT, and physical force – not persuasive words – is indicated by that word.

Perceiving that, He went from them onto a mountain by Himself. John is emphatic in telling us that Jesus went to the mountain “αὐτὸς μόνος – Himself alone;” nobody was with Him. That same phrase emphatically tells us that the Apostles did not come with Him. Surely, He could have taken the others with Him onto that mountain, as He often does, but in this case He does not.

Either that, or they wanted to go with Jesus, but were not allowed. Mark is equally emphatic that these same men didn’t want to get into the boat. Putting John and Mark together, the Apostles wanted to stay in the place of glory, the place where they had distributed the miraculous meal, the place where the crowds were calling their Lord Messiah, and they wanted Him to be their king.

It makes perfect sense that they would want to go with Jesus up onto the mountain to pray, and that was the norm for the group. Jesus prays alone before the calling of The Twelve, but after that, not so much. Luke tells that, “it happened that as He was praying alone the disciples were with Him,” and He prays alone at Gethsemane – with sleepy heads Peter, James, and John in tow.

Given what’s coming, it is also 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. Sometimes you can’t see the weather coming, and other times you can see it clearly. As for Jesus making them get on the boat while He went away, He’s going somewhere with this.

Recall how the Apostles had gone out, how they had done what they did and said what they said, and how, when they came back to Jesus, crowds followed them. The crowds followed *them*. How heady that must have been, and when Jesus went up to the mountain by Himself and left them there among the crowds, they would have been the rock stars. Who wants to leave that?

Maybe they saw a storm coming. Was it Jesus Who saw the signs? Maybe Jesus, who invented it, knew of coming weather, and it is also and finally possible that Jesus sent them out onto the sea *knowing* that the wind would be against them, *knowing* that the boat would be in trouble, *knowing* that He would do what He is about to do. Such a thing would not be without precedent.

The first few verses of Exodus 14 lay out God’s tactical plan to entrap Pharaoh, destroy him and his armies, and at the same time get glory for Himself. He tells Moses to tell Israel to go to a certain spot for the express purpose of trapping Pharaoh,

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 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...they were to go “εἰς τὸ πέραν πρὸς Βηθσαϊδάν, ἕως αὐτὸς ἀπολύει τὸν ὄχλον – to the other side, towards Bethsaida, until He should release the crowd.”

The verb “ἀπολύση – loose” 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 commonality of the verb in all its uses is separation; He is separating Himself from them, from the Bread King Movement, like how He several times tells people not to tell people about other miracles.

The aorist subjunctive form of that 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 He has to talk them into getting into the boat, because they really want to stay where they are – they don’t want separation, and then there’s the weather – and that He is going to dismiss the crowd.

46. And He does just that. And then, “καὶ ἀποταξάμενος αὐτοῖς ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸ ὄρος προσεύξασθαι – leaving from them, He went onto the mountain to pray.” We noted last week that Jesus deliberately takes vacation time, that he deliberately tells the disciples to do the same. But here He isn’t getting away for some down time. Here, we note, He also deliberately takes time to pray.

That verb translated “to pray” is προσεύξασθαι, and it is in the aorist middle infinitive form. 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. That’s not to say that Jesus is not involved in the prayer, but it is to say that for Mark the noteworthy thing here is that prayer is taking place.

Here, talk to your people about prayer. Americans pray often in their cars, and they should pray before meals, before going to sleep, upon waking up, and as circumstances dictate. They should more deliberately pray on Sunday mornings, gathered with other Christians, then pray during the week. Go ahead and review the sacramental and sacrificial aspects of Divine Service.

47. You may also recall that the rationale that began the whole feeding sequence was people coming to Jesus to tell Him that it’s getting late. Then the Twelve commanded Him to send them into town to get food, and the rest is history. It was already getting late then, and now Mark points out the obvious, “ὥψίας γενομένης – it had become evening,” and the Sun was setting in the west.

Then Mark locates the craft “ἥν τὸ πλοῖον ἐν μέσῳ τῆς θαλάσσης – the boat was in the middle of the sea.” The sun has set, and the boat is nowhere close to shore. The Sea of Galilee – actually a freshwater lake – has a surface area of 64 square miles. Find a lake in your area, and compare the Sea to it, so as to give your hearer an idea of what size a body of water we’re talking about here.

The body of water does not have to be very big to possibly get very dangerous in a storm. As noted a few weeks ago, this lake is very shallow, making wave action more severe than it would be in

deeper water. The water simply does not have very far to go before it bounces off the bottom. Note finally the smallness of the boat, perhaps referencing the Jesus Boat, which actually is a thing.

In describing the situation, Matthew does not tell us exactly how far the boat is from land, but he does say that it is “σταδίου πολλοῦ – a great number of stadia” from land. That unit of measurement gets its name from the average length of the average stadium, and is roughly equal to our furlough, which is about 200 yards. That’s how many is Matthew’s “a great number.”

Mark simply tells us that it was far enough to put them, “in the middle” of the roughly 12 X 6 mile Sea of Galilee, up to three to six miles from land. What that means is that the simplest of all solutions; just turn around and go back, is not an option here. To be sure, at least the wind would have been at their back, but at any rate they don’t really have control over where the boat goes.

As for Jesus, “καὶ αὐτὸς μόνος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς – He alone upon the earth.” The sentence is an ellipsis; there is no verb. Clearly the verb is “to be (was).” There could be no greater contrast between Him and the men on the boat, who are not alone, who are on the water, while Jesus is alone, and He is said to be on the earth. His situation is much more tenable than theirs is about to become.

48. From His place on dry land, Jesus “ἰδὼν αὐτοὺς βασανιζομένους ἐν τῷ ἐλαύνειν – seeing them struggling in the propelling.” The verb for what the people in the boat are doing occurs five times in the NT, and it is often translated “rowing.” Rowing is one means of propulsion, but a ship could also be propelled by sails, and later by a propeller or even jets. They are working hard.

The answer to the question of how Jesus could “see” them from that distance is that He is Jesus. I suppose it’s possible that He could see the wind blowing on the sea and from that deduce that His Homes were in trouble, but that’s not what it says. The man who does miracles all the time could certainly see things at great distance. We can’t. Superman can, but he’s not real. Jesus is real.

They had sails, and they had oars, and the engine-powered vessel is a very recent development. For most of human history boats have most often been powered by the wind. By “taking the right tack,” using the rudder and angle of sails to the wind, sailors can do remarkable things, zigging this way, zagging that way, almost seeming to be able to make a ship go against the wind.

But one thing that not even the best sailor can do; make a sailing ship go directly against the wind. These men in this boat are at the mercy of the wind to blow them wherever it will. Then this next phrase, and the door is opened back up to the possibility of the human Jesus seeing which way the wind was blowing, “ἦν γὰρ ὁ ἄνεμος ἐναντίος αὐτοῖς – because the wind was against them,”

He concluded that they were struggling. He decides to do something about it, and about 3:00 a.m. or thereabouts, and He comes to them “περιπατῶν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης – walking on the sea.” The night watch, or guard, was divided into four three-hour shifts, beginning at sundown. What happens next takes place in “τετάρτην φυλακὴν – the fourth guard,” between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m.

One of the things Tom Clancy has taught us – and he has taught us much - is that 3:00 a.m. is the time when men are at their lowest state of alertness. It is, therefore, a good time for a surprise attack in a Clancy novel or for an unnamed man to come walking across the sea towards this distressed boat. He is the figure said to be “περιπατῶν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης – walking on the sea.”

That’s a present active participle. It is furthermore said of Him that he “ἤθελεν παρελθεῖν αὐτούς – wanted to pass them by.” Whether that means He is racing with them, or ignoring them – what the commentators do with this passage – or something else entirely, it seems rather odd that Jesus would see the boat in travail, leave prayer and land, and then walk to the boat and go right past it.

Voelz calls this “one of the strangest sentences in Mark’s Gospel!” I concur. If we accept the premise that Jesus is alone on the mountain not because He told them to stay behind, but because they told Him that they were staying behind, and if we accept that they wanted to stay with the Bread King crowd and out of the boat – and the weather – then He is giving them the cold shoulder.

I do that, not frequently and selectively. It’s counterproductive to give the cold shoulder to your wife. She’ll give it right back, and she’s better at it than you are. I will give somebody the cold shoulder if he has said or done something to me that I don’t like. Done properly, the cold shoulder is an attention-getter, and it certainly did just that for Jesus. Or maybe He’s having fun with it.

49. When they saw Him; “οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης περιπατοῦντα ἔδοξαν ὅτι φάντασμα ἐστίν, καὶ ἀνέκραξαν – they seeing Him walking upon the sea thought that it is a apparition, and cried out.” Most of the translations lazily use the baggage-laden word “ghost” to translate φάντασμα, a word that appears only here and in Matthew’s account of this incident.

It’s a word used of something out of place, and a man walking on the water is a thing out of place, and they had no idea what to make of it. Their reaction to that is what would be expected; they let loose a collective non-voluntary scream that would chill the spine of the heartiest sailor. I don’t know if you want to say that they screamed like girls, but they screamed like girls.

The verb “ἀνακράζω – to scream” occurs only five times in the NT; here, three times out of the mouths of demons, and once from those howling for the crucifixion of Jesus. Put it all together, the feeding, the Bread King Movement, their being compelled against their will to get into the boat, it’s three o’clock in the morning, and it’s a dark and stormy night, and now this thing.

50. When they saw what they saw, Mark tells us that they were “ἐταράχθησαν – terrified.” Most of the translations use that word, and for that I commend them because they were. Finally, Jesus speaks to them, and He says to them “Θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ εἰμι, μὴ φοβεῖσθε – take courage and stop being afraid.” Both verbs are present imperatives, commands to stop doing things you are doing.

The favored translation for the first verb seems to be “take courage,” which sounds very British and begs to be preceded by “keep calm and...” The word is used seven times in the NT, and it

seems to be a word of encouragement for people who have been or currently are in distress, and these men certainly are in distress, but things are about to look up for them.

The second verb is the common word for “fear,” and the present tense preceded by “μὴ” means a command or request to stop doing something that you are currently doing. That’s the thing about the unknown, especially when you see the unknown walking on the water, and its dark and stormy so you don’t really get a really good look at it; fear of the unknown as the imagination runs wild.

Sandwiched between those two verbs is the reason *why* they should expect good things to happen, and why they should stop being afraid; “ἐγὼ εἰμι – I am.” To translate this, “it is I” or “it’s me” is correct, but does not capture the significance of Jesus saying, “ἐγὼ εἰμι,” It’s God’s personal name, the one first used when He spoke to Moses from the burning bush and Moses asked Whom He is.

51. Jesus then gets into the boat with them “καὶ ἐκόπασεν ὁ ἄνεμος – and the wind stopped.” Though not stated, and it might be a coincidence, the timing is curious. Having said that, such is not stated, and the miracle here is the walking on water. The reaction of those in the boat is “λίαν ἐκ περισσοῦ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἐξίσταντο – exceedingly in abundance they were in themselves amazed.”

52. Why are they amazed? They are amazed “οὐ γὰρ συνῆκαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἄρτοις – because they did not comprehend about the bread.” It’s Mark’s way of saying that when the masses had wanted to make Him their Bread King; in a day where you often did not know where your next meal was coming from, they would follow a man who could feed them, they had joined that crowd.

They did not understand that there are bigger fish to fry here than bread. The reason why they did not understand about the bread; they did not understand because “ἀλλ’ ἦν αὐτῶν ἡ καρδία πεπωρωμένη – their heart had been hardened.” Note the emphatic “but.” Note also the perfect tense of that verb; this hardening had been coming for some time, and that’s not a good thing.

It conjures up images especially of the Pharaoh, who was not a good person. But having seen the miracle involving food that happened right before this, they didn’t get it. In that way they are like Pharaoh, who likewise saw miracles in the plagues, and did not get it. Repeatedly. And whenever Jesus talks about “going to Jerusalem” or something like that, they don’t want to hear it.

So, they don’t get it when they see Him walking on water, which terrified them. Instead, both of those miracles should have been expected by them and they should have confirmed to them that Jesus is “I am.” Instead, they join the Bread King Movement, and that was so yesterday, and now we’re on the boat, and He walked on water, and how did He do that? Perhaps one day...

53. This location is not to be confused with the region of “Gerasene” (5:1ff.), where the man with the unclean spirit who lived down at the cemetery greeted Him. A google search of Gennesaret directs to Kinneret, described as a fertile plain on the Sea of Galilee. The place name derives from the place name כִּנְרֵת. Google maps places it at the southwestern end of the Sea.

54. Jesus and His entourage got out of the boat, and “εὐθὺς ἐπιγινόντες αὐτὸν – immediately they recognized Him,” not them. They recognized Jesus, probably by sight. The verb includes but is not limited to them knowing Him by seeing Him, and it could have been things like clothing, mannerisms, or the sound of His voice, but probably they recognized Him by sight.

55. Word spread quickly of Jesus’ presence among them, by means of “περιέδραμον ὅλην τὴν χώραν – running around the whole region” with the news. People from all around were bringing their sick to Him. Those who were bedridden were carried to Him by those who were not. It was clear what they had heard about Jesus, and it is clear what they expected of Him. He heals.

56. Now He goes on the move, and wherever He goes – and He goes all over the place – the sick people were brought to Him, and it looks like another case of a mass healing. Often, we are told of this or that healing, and sometimes names are used. Here, they just wanted to touch His clothing, and “ὅσοι ἂν ἥψαντο αὐτοῦ ἐσώζοντο – whoever touched Him were healed.”

Law/Gospel

Drowning/Saved – Weighed down by sin, we are drowning and dying. Jesus comes through the 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

Screaming Like Girls

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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Resources

BAG – Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

FGG – James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*. Concordia Publishing House, 1993

MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament*. T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

ODCC – F.L. Cross, Editor, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford University Press, 1978

RNK – Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

SCR – David Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church*, CPH, 2004

UBD – Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, 1977.

WP – A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Baker, 1930

VINE – W.E.Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

WIK – www.wikipedia.com

BIB – www.biblos.com

GBO – www.greekbible.com

Digital Classics Library - www.perseus.tufts.edu

Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html