

“Troubled Waters” – Mat 14:22-33 – Aug 10, 2008

There’s no doubt that it takes a bit of time to come back up to speed after some time off, like a relaxing vacation. I felt that residual slowness as I looked on Tuesday at the texts for today, and tried to come up with a clever title for this sermon. The best I could do was “troubled waters” but as I worked on the sermon it seemed that I had missed the boat, so to speak. If I get a chance to preach on this text again I think I might go with “That Sinking Feeling” instead.

That’s not just a different and perhaps catchier title, but I think it also highlights that the events of this episode are about the impact on people, and their reactions to those events, rather than the events themselves. Still, there is a connection with waters that are troubled, or stirred, as we’ll see in a bit.

This incident of the storm, and Jesus walking on the water, is well known. And because it is so well known, it is hardly known at all. I think we all have some idea of how the story goes, and perhaps a bit more accurately than the common popular misconceptions that are out there, but how many of you remember where in Jesus’ ministry this event occurs? Luke does not include the episode, but Matthew, Mark, and John all locate it immediately following the feeding of the multitudes. Now, for bonus points, what happened on the other side? Good – yes, Jesus and the disciples were swarmed by people again. This incident occurs in a hiatus between crowds of people on one shore, and crowds of people on the other shore. It is a story about Jesus and his disciples alone, and some commentators believe it is thus aimed at the church rather than the general populace.

In any event, the disciples were certainly feeling the impact - it was a time of great terror for the disciples. One comment I saw surmised that this fear seemed uncharacteristic of disciples who were fishermen, but I can’t agree. Quite the contrary, people who have an intimate knowledge of the water, especially oceans, seas, and large lakes, also have a deep and abiding sense of the inherent danger of such waters. Only people familiar with the water truly understand just how quickly the situation can change from lovely rippling waters to raging seas that can literally swallow boats and people alike in the blink of an eye. Maritimers understand that fear, and each year sing the hymn we just sang on the Battle of the Atlantic Sunday

The disciples were terrified, of that there is little doubt. And to compound their deep fear out of the darkness comes a figure like a ghost, walking across the water as if it were smooth pavement. In a moment that rings with echoes of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, the disciples in their fear and terror do not even recognize him. Their panic is complete; their sense of being abandoned to and in peril of all the evil and tortured creatures lurking in the dark waters is total.

How often life is like that for all of us, isn’t it? I think people are divided into two categories – those who have experienced dark and stormy and frightening times, and those who will. Oh, I’ll concede that perhaps there are some who sail serenely through life without any stormy periods, but I can’t recall ever having met anybody like that. For most of us, there have been dark and stormy times, times when in our own fear and terror we haven’t been able to see Jesus walking serenely with us. And there are those in the church who take advantage of these times of fear for their own ends. Just this week I answered the front doorbell at home to discover a kindly old gentleman, neatly dressed in jacket and tie, carrying some paperwork in his hand. His opening question had

something to do with enquiring about my opinions with regard to whether or not the governments were doing enough about climate change. I had by this time sussed him out as a Jehovah's Witness (who are, I have been told, a Presbyterian Bible Study gone bad) and so I thought I'd have a bit of fun. As he continued to probe, obviously trying to get me to agree that the world was going to hell in a handbasket, I continued to point out to him how at the very spot we were standing, some 10,000 years ago there was a kilometer of ice over our heads. I further went on to expound how I thought it was a sadness that people thought God was so limited as to have created the earth and then washed his hands of the whole affair, and moreover how so many people seemed to have the misunderstanding that the earth was a static and fixed placed, and went on to point out how the planet is constantly changing, and how God had given people the gift of being adaptable to these changes, and ... well, you get the picture ... before too long he simply handed me his tracts and excused himself.

But how many people, devout Christians all, believe that simply because they believe, that life will be smooth sailing? It's a popular and popularist view of Christianity – there's even a name for it, "commodity Christianity" – in which people believe that in return for faith God will shower blessings of health, wealth, and happiness; "true" belief will result in a good job, a wonderful spouse, 2.6 darling children, a large house in the burb's, a car, RV, boat, and other trinkets galore.

It's no wonder there's a crisis of faith for people who hold those beliefs when disease strikes, the children do drugs, the RV and boat are repossessed, and the marriage breaks up. Real life brings dark and stormy nights when all seems lost. Real life brings moments when we can't recognize Jesus standing right there in front of us. Real life is full of times of troubled waters, and scripture recounts many, many of those, including this momentous time for the disciples.

But scripture also brings us reassurances that we can weather these storms, and nowhere is this clearer than in this episode. Of course there's the obvious and miraculous instant calming of the storm at Jesus' command. In this account, Jesus didn't even have to voice the command – the raging storm and waters calmed as he and Peter got into the boat. And then there's that strange business with Peter. Matthew is the only one who reports this odd interchange between Jesus and Peter at the height of the drama. I describe it as 'odd' not because of the miraculous nature of what took place, with Peter attempting to emulate Jesus' walking on water, but instead because of Peter's challenge to Jesus. Recall that Peter challenged Jesus with the charge, "Lord, if it is you command me to come to you on the water." Jesus responds to that challenge by doing so, and Peter does so, except that Peter begins to sink (our former student, Wendy Adams, noted on Facebook that "of course Peter sank ... he was a ROCK!") and Jesus rescues him.

Peter's challenge to Jesus was answered ... but not in the way that Peter expected, I think. I suspect Peter anticipated that if it really was Jesus then he (Peter) could walk over to join him, and arm-in-arm they would stroll back to the boat or to the far shore together. But that's not how it turned out, is it?

If this scripture incident is meant, as some believe, as a message to the church or to the faithful, then perhaps there's the crux of the message: that we can challenge Jesus to save us from the storms and perils of life, and he will, but not necessarily in the ways that we either expect or demand. I suspect even God might lose count of the ways that people find in prayer to demand this, ask that, expect the other, and tell God how to do it

to boot! The church has a sad and ignoble history of assuming it is the equal of Jesus, and needs to hear from this story that like Peter we cannot tell God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit exactly how to do what we want them to do. Peter and the others were indeed saved, but not necessarily in the way they thought it might happen.

If we can hear the message that Jesus can and will save us from the storms of life, we might also be able to hear or at least understand the corollary that there will be storms in life. Unlike the J.W. fellow that showed up at my door, however, I believe we can also hear that these storms do not mean the end of things, that God is somehow tired of us or bored and just waiting to wrap it all up. Storms, times of troubled waters, are a normal part of life ... what is important is that we will – like Peter – be kept safe through our faith in Jesus ... it just may not happen the way we expect.

And it helps to recall that troubled waters are not always trouble. For example, do you recall the incident between Jesus and the man at the pool at Beth-zatha (or Bethesda, or Bethsaida, depending on whose mispronunciation you're following)? This was the time that Jesus encountered the man who was an invalid and unable to make it into the pool. Every time the waters were “stirred” the crowd pushed ahead of him and he couldn't get there in time – Jesus told him to “take up your mat and walk”, and he did. Note the detail, that the waters only had healing power when they were troubled, or “stirred” (not “shaken”, for you Bond fans). Recall also the references to “streams of living water” in scripture, and consider how rippling brooks and even thundering waterfalls are so much more alive and healthier than stagnant pools. Lakes that have been cut off from other flowing water have no marine life in them, and are even referred to as “dead” lakes.

There is indeed a sense of the miraculous in this incident in the storm in Galilee ... but it is the miracle that Jesus will help us through times of trouble in spite of ourselves that is far and away more important than the mere miracle of controlling the elements of creation. When we look back at the times of troubled waters in our lives, I'm sure that we can see not only how Jesus was indeed present with us through those times, but also how he reached out and kept us from sinking as well. I suspect we might also be able to remember how the solutions turned out somewhat different from what we had hoped for, asked for, expected ... but also how the solutions turned out to be better in the long run. In that remembering, I hope that we might also recall how Jesus affirmed his presence with us, saying “it is I; do not be afraid”; how we also challenged “Lord, if it is you”; and finally how we are now able, also like the disciples, to affirm in our faith, “truly, you are the Son of God.”