

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Then he made the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. ²⁴ Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. ²⁵ During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ At once (Jesus) spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." ²⁸ Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw how (strong) the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² After they got into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

Context

After the collection of parables in Mt 13, the following chapter takes up what might well be a natural fall out of his teachings that are increasingly vague even as they point to coming judgment – weeds that will be burned and fish that will be discarded. People begin to wonder if Jesus is pronouncing judgment upon them or their “group.”

The inevitable pushback or rejection will become more and more present in the narrative or at least in its subtext. Despite the pushback, Jesus must prepare the disciples. And so after teaching the disciples about the nature of the kingdom and why people do not necessarily believe (Mt 13), the Gospel reaches a pivot point in the telling of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth, *his native place* (v.54). As usual the people are *astonished*, but in the end *they took offense at him* (v.57). Nonetheless Jesus continues to prepare disciples.

Where in Mt 13 he taught them via parables, in 14:12-21 he has a “hands on” lesson as he tells the disciples to *give them some food yourselves* as a prelude to feeding the people – and then shows them what they can accomplish through trust in the One whom God sent. On the heels of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, that brings us to this gospel passage where we encounter the narrative of the calming the seas, Peter’s walking upon the waters, and Jesus’ action to save him.

In the preceding chapters, Matthew draws heavily upon the biblical imagery of the prophets like Elisha and especially upon the role of Moses. This is part of Matthew’s fulfillment motifs: the promise of the great-prophet-like-Moses is coming to pass in the person of Jesus – yet there is something more. God presented the miracles to Moses as mediator to the people. Jesus presents the miracles directly to the people. What are they to make of these revelations? But in the even deeper miracle of walking upon the water, what are the Apostles to make to that revelation? This is one way the key Matthean themes of “who am I,” the making of disciples, and choosing/ conflict that continues in Matthew 14.

Church and Mission. There is also another theme that arises in this content. Matthew is the one gospel writer who uses the term *ekklesia*, the word which means “church.” There is much about Matthew’s gospel and these chapters that is well suited for the use of church leaders – in instructing their members in the faith and in determining their own pastoral role. It deals with such practical issues as the sabbath (12:1–14) and divorce (5:31–32; 19:3–9). More generally it includes extended discussion of the right ethical use of the Old Testament law (5:17–48) and the misuse of scribal tradition (15:1–20). Chapter 23 is a fairly stringent condemnation of religious leadership (the scribes and Pharisees) – and so by way of contrast indicating what true religious leadership involves. Chapter 10 deals with the church’s response to persecution, and chapter 18 concentrates almost entirely on

relationships within the Christian community, with special attention given to the proper procedure for dealing with an offender (18:15–20). It even provides warnings of threats from outside the community – false prophets and pseudo-Messiahs (7:15–20 and 24:4–5, 11, 23–26); while reminding the community of its own internal problems (7:6, 13–27; 13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50; 22:10–14). It is the church that will be sent on mission in Matthew 26.

All true, but why mention it here? Matthew has already used the boat as a symbol for the church in Chapter 8 (*the calming of the storm at sea*) in which the Apostles are in the boat with Jesus. In this section of Matthew's gospel, the symbol of "boat as church" is repeated - but this time only the Apostles are in the boat. It is a pre-echo of the time, post-Resurrection, when the Apostles will be without the physical presence of Jesus as their immediate mentor.

Commentary

²² Then he made the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. This is the only place after the initial period in the wilderness (4:1–11) where Matthew specifically mentions that Jesus chose to be truly alone, sending his disciples away. This pericope (scholar language for "story") is the first time in the Gospel according to Matthew that Jesus is pictured as praying. Even in Gethsemane he will keep three of the disciples with him (26:37). Matthew does not elsewhere mention Jesus' habit of praying alone, as in Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, though he has of course recorded his instruction to his disciples to pray in this way, 6:5–6.

It would be possible therefore to read this unusual note as indicating a particular crisis at this point in Jesus' ministry. But that would be an argument from silence, and Matthew gives us no indication of the subject of Jesus' prayer. In the narrative context the solitary prayer in the hills serves rather to explain how Jesus comes to be so far away from his disciples on this occasion when they find themselves in difficulties. (France, 569)

Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. From Jesus praying alone in the hills the spotlight shifts to the disciples in trouble (again) on the lake—and this time without Jesus in the boat to rescue them. This account is not the first time that the disciples have been in a storm-tossed boat with Jesus (see 8:23–27) – even then he asked why they had such little faith. But this account is the first time the apostles have been without Jesus - and this is a foreshadowing of the mission after the Resurrection.

If the disciples are rowing from somewhere in the region of Bethsaida (suggested by 14:13–21) to Gennesaret (v. 34) it is surprising to find them so far from the shore, but presumably they have been driven off course by the contrary wind. The situation seems to be similar to the storm in 8:24, though the focus in this narrative is on the wind (vv. 24, 30, 32) rather than the waves. The disciples' predicament this time is the inability to make headway rather than an imminent danger of sinking.

Possible symbols in Matthew's narrative. Many scholars have noted that Matthew reworks the parallel account in Mark 4:35–41. Matthew's rewriting of Mark emphasizes the separation between Jesus and the disciples; Jesus was "*by himself...alone*" and the disciples are "*a few miles offshore.*" Is it perhaps this idea of being sent forth alone that should receive the narrative focus? The disciples are in the storm-tossed boat, symbolic of the church's stormy missionary journey through history, sent forth alone, and Jesus, who represents the presence of God, is not with them. At the level of Matthean understanding, this may be the meaning of Jesus' "made" them (v.22) to depart (*anankazō* – to compel [EDNT 1:77]).

We should be mindful that each Sunday we sit in the “nave” of the church, a word whose origins come from the Latin *navis* which means “boat” or “ship”. The “ship” we are in was not intended to stay tied up to the dock. The boat/church symbolism of 8:23-27 (*calming of the storm at sea*) is strengthened by representing the boat as “being tortured” (*basanizō*) by the waves (not the disciples laboring at rowing, as in Mark). This verb is normally used for people (Mt 8:6, 29) rather than a boat. In both cases, Matthew allows his symbolism to shape his description, for in both cases he is thinking of the suffering the church will experience during its mission on which it is sent forth “alone” (i.e., without the Jesus who promised to always be with them, 28:20).

The picture is not limited to its ecclesial and missionary symbolism, however. The sea itself in biblical thought connotes the forces of chaos, held at bay in the creative act of God, but always threatening (Gen 1 : 1-10; 7:1 I ; Pss 1 8:1 5-1 6; 69:1-3; 107:23-32; 144:5-8). To the biblical mind, being on the sea is itself a threat, representing all the anxieties and dark powers that threaten the goodness of the created order. To be at sea evokes images of death, the active power that threatens the goodness of life. The sea is here a barrier that separates the disciples from Jesus, who represents the presence of God. In the midst of the chaos of the world, they are left alone in the boat/church, with only their fragile craft preserving them from its threat, buffeted by the stormy winds of conflict and persecution, mentioned three times (vv. 24, 30, 32).

Coming on the Water

In biblical thought, only God walks on the sea (Job 9:8 - “*He alone stretches out the heavens and treads upon the back of the sea*”; Ps 77:20 - “*Through the sea was your way; your path, through the mighty waters, though your footsteps were unseen.*”). But by treading on the sea, Jesus now takes a role that the Hebrew Bible had reserved for God alone.

²⁵ *During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea.* ²⁶ *When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. “It is a ghost,” they said, and they cried out in fear.* (An unnecessary note: many translations offer “early in the morning” vs. “fourth watch of the night” an ancient nautical term and still used in navies even today. Go Navy!)

Remember that the Apostles had left Jesus on shore. Apparently, it had not occurred to them that Jesus could know their plight, walk on water to come to them, or catch up with them in a storm! To their credit, however, the fear issue seems to be solved once they recognize that their teacher is with them. They knew him enough to know that if he was there, he would bring them through their storm.

Jesus responds: “*At once (Jesus) spoke to them, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.*” Precisely in the midst of this story, Jesus is already doing what only God can do, and now speaks with the voice of God, saying *ego eimi*, literally “I am.” The formula is first one of simple identification, “It is I” – not a ghost as you fear. But the phrase also evokes the self-identification of God, Yahweh (YHWH) the one who says absolutely “I am” (see Exod 3:13-15). Scholars argue whether this means that Matthew here claims that Jesus is Yahweh given that he had just pictured Jesus as praying to God. Some argue “either or” and hold that Matthew only intends that the divine presence and assurance is mediated by Jesus, as promised in 1:23. Others adhere to a “both-and” view and hold that Matthew intends both.

Peter’s Response

Given other stories we know about Peter, there is a bias for us to assume Peter is just being Peter here in this story, impetuously acting before considering the bigger picture. But we should remember that this story is likely grounded in saying something about *ekklesia* (church). Eugene Boring (328) points out that this is no longer a story about what Jesus alone can do:

The Christ who speaks with authority (chaps. 5-7), acts with authority (chaps. 8-9), and then confers this same authority on his disciples (chap. 10) here shares his power and authority with his disciples. The figure of Peter should not here (or elsewhere in Matthew) be

psychologized as impetuous, but later failing. We do not have a psychological profile, but a character in a story representing all the disciples, portraying the theological meaning of discipleship as such. Peter addresses Jesus as a believer would, “Lord” (non-believers in Matthew use other titles). He has the right christological title and shows great personal faith, but he leaves the boat and the community.

At first things go well, but alone, outside the boat/community he has only his own faith to rely upon and he soon discovers he is *of little faith* (v.31). But the core question Jesus asks is “*why did you doubt?*” Peter is the first among the disciples, and the typical one, but he can become the agent and voice of Satan (16:33). Is Peter’s walking on the sea a sign of faith or lack of faith? Is he being like the Tempter who asked, “If you are the Son of God,” when he asks, “If it is you,” and he seeks proof that Jesus is really present? Is he putting God to the test?

Boring writes (328):

For Matthew, Peter’s problem was not only that he took his eyes off Jesus, but that he wanted proof of the presence of Christ, and so left the boat in the first place. . . . The gentle rebuke identifies Peter as the typical disciple in Matthew; ‘little faith’ is the dialectical mixture of courage and anxiety, of hearing the word of the Lord and looking at the terror of the storm, of trust and doubt, which is always an ingredient of Christian existence, even after the resurrection. The last point is underscored by the peculiar word used here for ‘doubt’ (*distazō*), which connotes vacillation, not skepticism. It is used elsewhere in the NT only in Matthew 28:17 of the disciples in the presence of the risen Lord.

Boring concludes (329-30):

The message is not “If he had enough faith, he could have walked on the water,” just as the message to us is not “If we had enough faith, we could overcome all our problems in spectacular ways.” This interpretation is wrong in that it identifies faith with spectacular exceptions to the warp and woof of our ordinary days, days that are all subject to the laws of physics and biology. This is wrong because when our fantasies of overcoming this web are shattered by the realities of accident, disease, aging, and circumstance and we begin to sink, this view encourages us to feel guilt because of our “lack of faith.”

What if the message of this text were “If he had had enough faith, he would have believed the word of Jesus that came to him in the boat as mediating the presence and reality of God”? Faith is not being able to walk on the water – only God can do that – but daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence, that God is with us in the boat, made real in the community of faith as it makes its way through the storm, battered by the waves.

What happened to Peter (the “Rock”) with his little faith and his doubts? One answer is, “He sank into the sea like a rock.” Another answer is, “He was saved by Jesus.” For most of us whose faith is unable to move mountains and thus must be smaller than mustard seeds (*cf* 17:20); we are assured that even our microscopic faith is sufficient for salvation. It is the person of faith who cries out to Jesus in time of need. Martin Luther’s observation described the human condition well: *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously saint and sinner).

Back in the Boat

At last – back in the boat. Back in the community we see the only genuine response possible: “*Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”*” While such actions may or may not have happened by the disciples in a small boat on a lake in Galilee, such responses should happen in every generation from a grateful church that experiences the impossible presence of Christ with it in its mission.

This confession comes as part of a longer discourse about Jesus' identity that begins in 13:54. In vv. 54-58 Jesus is in his hometown and they understand him to be “the carpenter's son.” Ch. 14 begins with Herod wondering if Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead. Matthew 14:33 reveals the answer to “who is Jesus” – He is the Son of God. And it shows the response of the true disciple: worship Jesus with the community of believers.

....*A small thing to consider*

Why did the disciples cross the lake (v.22)? To get to the other side – not always a joking matter. What's on the other side of the lake? What's so important on the other side, that Jesus, literally, “immediately” (*eutheos*) “forces” (*anagkazo*) the disciples to get into the boat and head that direction? When disciples first cross the lake through a storm, they land on the Gentile/unclean side (Mt 8:23-34). With this boat trip, Jesus had sent them to “the other side” (14:22, see also 16:5), was that meant to be the Gentile side? In Mark, Jesus had sent the disciples to Bethsaida (Mk 6:45), which is on the Gentile side of the Jordan, but they didn't make it. They end up in Gennesaret (Mk 6:53; Mt 14:34) which is on the Jewish side of Lake Galilee. Can storms at sea (and “little faith”) keep disciples from reaching the destinations where Jesus has sent them? It is a question we can all ask of ourselves and our communities of faith.

This issue of “other” and “clean/unclean” is the issue Jesus takes up in Mt 15

Notes

Matthew 14: 25 *the fourth watch of the night*: between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. The Romans divided the twelve hours between 6pm and 6am into four equal parts called “watches.” Some have questioned how the disciples would have seen Jesus coming on the waters, approaching in the dark. The mention of the fourth watch might indicate that there was already a hint of pre-dawn light.

Matthew 14:26 *saw him walking on the sea*: In biblical thought, only God walks on the sea (Job 9:8; 38:16; Ps 77:19; Isa 43:16; 51:9-10; Hab 3:5; Sirach 24:5-6, of Divine Wisdom). Questions are raised whether the response of the disciples: “*It is a ghost*” is a superstitious response reflecting the popular belief that evil spirits lived in the sea or that those who had drowned haunted the water. Or was it a reactionary conclusion because the alternative was recognition that Jesus was indeed God.

Matthew 14:27 *It is I*: *ego eimi*, literally “I am” invoking the divine name of God in Exodus.

Matthew 14:29 *Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus*: there are many small textual variations in the sources surrounding this one verse. The predominant and accepted understanding is that Peter got out of the boat, began to walk on the water, but after some success, ran into trouble and began to sink. The alternative readings, depending on the verb tense one discerns is being used, can also indicate that Peter intended to come to Jesus but sank from step one.

Matthew 14:31 *little faith*: *oligopistia*; of the six times the phrase occurs in the NT, five are in Matthew: 6:30 (par. Lk 12:28); 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; and 17:20). They are always descriptions of the disciples. Although Jesus calls attention to the fact that his disciples are people of little faith, he never indicates that there is anything that they can do about this. He doesn't offer to increase their faith, nor does he give them any guidance as to what they might do to increase it themselves. One would think that if “little faith” is what's holding these disciples back, then Jesus would tell them what to do about this problem. But he doesn't. He points out their little faith as an explanation for why they are not making progress as quickly as they would like, but he never tells them how they can get more faith to remedy that situation.

Sources

- G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007)
- Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew* in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994) 327-330
- Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 2000) 308-12
- R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) 565-72
- R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 1, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989) 240-43
- Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 223-28
- Daniel J. Harrington, "Matthew" in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) 883
- Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009) 385-90
- John P. Meier, *Matthew*, *New Testament Message* 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990) 163-66
- D. Turner and D.L. Bock, *Matthew and Mark* in the *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, vol. 11 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005) 203-4

Dictionaries

- Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)
- Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990)

Scripture

The New American Bible available on-line at [the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops \(USCCB\)](#).