

Walking on the Water  
Matthew 14:22-36

I like to joke that our presbytery adopted the wrong name when we were organized in 2014. Instead of being known as the “Presbytery of the Gulf South,” we should have styled ourselves the “Presbytery of Natural Disasters.” After all, we had to make a last-minute change in our September 2017 meeting place, gathering at Hope Church in San Antonio because so much of the Houston area had been flooded by Hurricane Harvey. And of course First Baton Rouge continues to organize relief efforts in the Lake Charles area, which was pounded by Hurricanes Laura and Delta just six weeks apart last summer. Between 3000 and 5000 people are still displaced almost a year after the storms destroyed their homes – and now the price of building materials is making reconstruction even more difficult.

Yes, from Hurricanes Camille to Katrina and Rita, from tornados that rip through forests to ice storms that cause roofs to collapse, from droughts to floods and back again, we Mississippi folk know all about unpredictable and violent weather. But we are also all too familiar with other kinds of storms that blow through our lives – storms that often come upon us with no warning and through no fault of our own.

When forgetfulness is diagnosed as Alzheimer’s. When nagging pain turns out to be a tumor. When a fall turns into a hospital stay. And for well over a year, all of us Americans have had to endure the worldwide consequences of what could very well have been a tragic lab accident in Wuhan, China: none of us ate bats or did experiments on them, but all of us have had to be isolated from our friends and places of work and worship. And far too many of us have lost businesses or health or loved ones.

So I think we can all sympathize with Jesus’ disciples, as they were tossed about by the waves, struggling to row across the Sea of Galilee into a stiff headwind that just sprang up from nowhere, as storms are still wont to do in that area. We know what it’s like to have sudden and serious troubles come upon us no matter how faithful to Christ we have tried to be.

But for us Presbyterians, with our faith in the sovereign providence of God, the storms of life can bring even greater confusion and heartache. After all, we know good and well that God is completely in charge of everything that happens. Just as we read responsively this morning from Psalm 89, we know the heavens and the earth belong to God, the One Who created them, along with everything they contain. And verse 9 specifically adds that God rules the swelling of the seas, stilling the waves when they rise.

Moreover, we Presbyterians draw great assurance from the fact that God even takes the initiative in our salvation, removing hearts of stone and giving us hearts of flesh, breathing new life into spiritually dead souls, drawing to Himself those who come to faith in Christ. In fact, Presbyterian Deacon Stonewall Jackson went so far as to say that he was “as safe in battle as in bed. God has fixed the time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter when it may overtake me.”

Stirring words, drawn from an unshakable faith in an almighty, sovereign God. But how then do we Presbyterians explain the errant shot of a Confederate sentry which felled General Jackson? How do we explain the diseases and griefs and losses that come into our lives, unbidden and unwelcome? Dare we believe that God sent those sufferings our way?

Well, the disciples couldn’t help but wonder about that. After all, verse 22 makes it plain that Jesus was the One Who constrained them, who compelled them to get into that boat and head across

the Sea into that storm. Even worse, Jesus insisted that they go ahead without Him. The disciples thus could not deny that Jesus was the One Who had sent them into a dangerous, scary situation alone.

And Ethan the Ezrahite, who wrote Psalm 89, acknowledges the same difficult truth. For toward the end of the psalm as he recalls the military disasters that had befallen the Israelite and Judean kings, Ethan says to God, “You have cast off and abhorred, You have been furious with Your anointed. You have broken down all his hedges; You have brought his strongholds to ruin. You have exalted the right hand of his adversaries; You have made all his enemies rejoice. You have made his glory cease, and cast his throne down to the ground” (Psalm 89:38, 40, 42, 44).

And can't we also sympathize with those storm-tossed disciples, who felt totally alone in the midst of a problem they could not deny had come from the Lord? As we pick up after one more wind storm, as we wait for diagnoses or endure expensive and painful treatments, as our grief leaves our hearts as empty as what Alan Jackson describes as a Monday morning church, it's easy to fall into despair. It's easy to lose hope. It's easy to wonder along with Ethan, “How long, Lord? Will you hide Yourself forever” (Psalm 89:46)?

Worse yet, when God finally does show up, and when He finally does bring a solution to the problems that we've prayed about so earnestly, sometimes His providence is just as frightening as the problems we face. A new job may increase our incomes, but may require moving away from family and friends. A marriage may end our loneliness, but a lifelong commitment to another's wellbeing may be a daunting prospect indeed. Ethan acknowledges in Psalm 89 that much of the suffering of God's people resulted from their kings not keeping God's commandments or walking in His judgments (vv. 30-31), but that didn't make God's solution, the military invasion that ended their corrupt reigns, any less frightening or painful.

In the same way, when Jesus showed up in the midst of that storm on the Sea of Galilee, it wasn't a warm, fuzzy moment for the disciples. For they hadn't expected Him to come to them in such an amazing way. And they couldn't understand how anyone could possibly walk on the water. And so instead of being comforted by His presence and confident in His providence, they cried out in fear. They assumed that Jesus was some sort of evil spirit.

Of course, Peter had a different reaction, and we might at first glance assume that he was somehow more faithful than the others. But let's take a closer look at his words and deeds. For notice in verse 28 that he says, “Lord, if it is You” – that's not exactly a ringing vote of confidence in Jesus, is it? And notice also that Peter doesn't ask Jesus to do anything, at least at first. Instead, he tells Jesus to command him to walk on the water just as Jesus was doing.

So, what's behind Peter's boldness? Could it be that Peter wanted to be able to transcend his problem, to become in a sense immune to the fearful dangers all around him? Could it be that Peter was trying to use his relationship to Jesus to somehow escape from the helplessness and despair that he and the rest of the disciples were experiencing? Or was Peter just restless, wanting to do something, anything to break out of the stalemate which existed between the rowers and the wind? We can understand all these feelings – we've experienced them ourselves.

But we have to admit that none of them are particularly faithful, and neither are so many of the tactics we use to confront the difficult circumstances in which we find ourselves all too often. For don't we find ourselves at times drifting away from trust in God into stoicism, simply trying to steel ourselves to endure our problems without any real hope of relief? Instead of earnest prayer, don't we sometimes bury ourselves in work or distract ourselves with entertainment to forget our problems? Some of us go so far as to use alcohol or other drugs to make our pain go away – but it always comes back, doesn't it?

And let's face it – in the midst of our worst problems we can even use our faith in Christ in a faithless way. Like Peter, we can make demands on God, insisting that He solve our problems at the time or in the way we think is best. Or we can convince ourselves that because we express our faith in a certain way, God will have to deliver whatever it is that we want or need – that, after all, is what the prosperity gospel preachers say. But all of our feeble, flailing attempts to deal with the storms of life in our own strength will eventually leave us where Peter found himself – in way over his head, and sinking fast.

But that's where we find the good news in this passage. For the fact is that when Peter stopped trying to be in charge, when he stopped making demands on God, when he simply cried out in his helplessness, "Lord save me," well, Jesus did just that. The good news is that when Peter was in over his head, it was Jesus who reached out His mighty hand and caught hold of Peter. The good news is that when Peter finally realized that there was nothing he could do to save himself, Jesus was able to do exactly what Peter had attempted in his own strength – He walked on the water, transcending the impossible situation in which Peter and the rest of the disciples had found themselves.

But Jesus did much more than that, didn't He? For He didn't just use His mighty power to lift Peter up out of the water and back into the storm-tossed boat. No, He also did exactly what Ethan the Ezrahite said only God could do back in Psalm 89 – Jesus ruled the raging of the sea. The creator of the oceans caused the waves to be still.

And now maybe we can get a glimpse of why God sometimes allows such storms to come into our lives. Maybe we can understand why God waits until our own helplessness and weakness can no longer be ignored or denied before reaching out His hand to help us. For it was only when that happened for the disciples that they confessed Jesus to be the Son of God.

Now, think about that. It wasn't Jesus' inspired teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that brought them to that conclusion. It wasn't Jesus' casting out of the demons or the miraculous healings that He had accomplished so many times before, and as He would do again immediately after they came ashore. It wasn't even His feeding of 5000 families with 5 dinner rolls and a couple of sardines, as we saw earlier in this chapter. No, it was only when the disciples were completely exhausted, only when they had given up trying to help themselves, only when they were completely overwhelmed and frightened and confused that they could respond to Jesus' saving power with a deeper understanding and a clearer faith.

Brothers and sisters, could the same thing be true for us? Could it be that God allows the storms of sickness and grief, of pain and poverty to come into our lives so that we might see Him more clearly for Who He is? Could it be that God brings us to the end of our strength so that we might give Him greater glory for our salvation? Could it be that God reveals the insufficiency of our own efforts at greater holiness so that we might give Him greater praise for His amazing, saving grace?

For what was the lesson Jesus wanted His disciples to learn when they came face to face with their inability to solve their own problems? What did Jesus want Peter to learn when he was literally in over his head? Simply this: they had no need to fear even the frightening, overwhelming circumstances of their lives that were completely out of their control. They had no reason to doubt the awesome way Jesus chose to save them. Instead, they could take courage simply because He, the Son of God, was with them. "Why do you doubt? It is I; be not afraid."

And that's the same lesson Jesus would have us learn, no matter what storms of life we may be facing today, no matter how far we may be in over our heads. For the good news is that the Son of God,

the One Who created the heavens and the earth, the One Who walks on the water is still with us, no matter what we're going through. And He is still willing and able to help us in His way and in His time.