

## WALKING ON THE WATER

*(Matthew 14:22-33)*

This story addresses the primal fears that cripple us as human beings and as followers of Jesus. These are fears of the power of chaos in its many and varied forms, from the uncontrollable powers of nature to the irrational forces that suddenly arise from the depths of our personal and communal lives. Symbolized as storms, wind, and ghosts, these unknown forces of chaos blow through our lives. And the fear of these powers often leads us into weak resignation, cowardice, and withdrawal. This story is an experience of testing those powers, discerning who is truly in control, and taking the first steps toward true discipleship. It sets those fears in the context of Jesus' power, which he both exercises on our behalf and offers to those who believe in him.

### The Story

And immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone.

But the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves.

For the wind was against them.

And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.

But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!"

And they cried out from fear.

But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I. Have no fear."

And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water."

He said, "Come."

So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid.

And beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me."

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?"

And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

## Learning the Story

### *Verbal Threads*

The major thread that ties this story together is fear: "They cried out from fear" (vs. 26) is the climax of the fourth-watch episode; the end of Jesus' response is, "Have no fear" (vs. 27); and finally, "When [Peter] saw the wind, he was afraid" (vs. 30).

**"Walking on the sea [waters]."** The first two sentences of the central episode have the same key phrase, "he came to them, walking on the sea" (vs. 25) and "[they] saw him walking on the sea" (vs. 26). A variation of the same phrase describes Peter walking on the water (vs. 29), which in turn picks up the key word in Peter's request to Jesus, "bid me come to you on the water" (vs. 28).

**"The boat."** Jesus commands them to get into the boat (vs. 22); the boat is many yards from shore, beaten by the waves (vs. 24); Peter gets out of the boat (vs. 29); and after the rescue, Jesus and Peter climb up into the boat (vs. 32). The boat is the central motif at or near the beginning of the first and last of the story (vss. 22-23, 31-33). Thus, getting into, out of, and up into the boat is a verbal thread that knits together the framing scenes of the story.

**"Dismissed the crowd."** The first two sentences of the story are connected by this phrase: "while he dismissed the crowd" (vs. 22) and "after he had dismissed the crowd" (vs. 23).

**"Bid me come"/"come."** In the same manner, Peter's request "bid me come" (vs. 28) is followed by Jesus' call, "Come" (vs. 29).

The episodes of this story have the characteristic marks of episode beginnings that describe either the time or the place of the action: (1) "immediately," (2) "when evening came," (3) "in the fourth watch," (4) "immediately," (6) "got out of the boat," (7) "immediately." These openings both set the scene for each new episode and tie it to the preceding one. These connections make remembering the episodes of the story a simple step-by-step process.

The two parts of the story have a common, three-part structure: walking on the water, first by Jesus (vs. 2Sff.) and then Peter (vs. 29); a response of fear and crying out by the disciples (vs. 26) and then Peter (vs. 30); and Jesus' immediate response, which calms their fears (vss. 27, 31-32).

## Listening to the Story

A comparison of the different ways in which Mark and Matthew tell this story is interesting. Mark presents this story as a theophany that reveals Jesus' divine character. Mark's puzzling inside view of Jesus intending to "pass by them" is related to the frequent motif in the stories of Moses and Elijah of the revelation of God "passing by" (Exod. 33: 19,22; I Kings 19: 11). Matthew has included in this story other elements from the Old Testament traditions of divine appearances. "It is I" is a translation of the Greek *ego eimi*, which is the name of God in the theophany at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14). Translating this phrase as "I am" more clearly preserves this connection to the divine name. Also, "have no fear" is a characteristic motif in stories of appearances by a divine figure, either God or angels (Gen. 15:1; Judg. 6:23; Dan. 10:12; Luke 1:13; 2:10). These motifs in Matthew are the most explicit characterization of Jesus as a divine figure to this point in the narrative. But the most distinctive element of Matthew's telling of the story is Peter's courageous, if short-lived,

walking on the water. This transferral of Jesus' divine power to Peter is Matthew's unique contribution to this narrative tradition.

The story has an unusually complex setting that requires two episodes to get everything in place. The first episode draws the feeding of the crowd to a close and introduces the boat and the trip across the sea. The second episode sets the scene for the walking on the water. The dismissal of the crowd is matter of fact and calm in its atmosphere. The scene in the evening is one of increasing anxiety: Jesus alone on the land; the boat way out on the sea, beaten by the waves. Once again, as in the description of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:26), the narrative comment here, "for the wind was against them," explains not only why they were having so much trouble with the waves but also why the storyteller described it with so much intensity. The climax of the setting is then this confidential comment by the storyteller to the listeners which describes the disciples' frightening and lonely journey.

The implication of the setting, "in the fourth watch of the night," is that the disciples spent most of the night trying to get across the lake against the wind. The Romans divided the night watch from 6:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. into four three-hour shifts. The "fourth watch" was 3:00 to 6:00 A.M. The atmosphere of this setting is the tone of impending terror typical of ghost stories, the deep darkness of the night when spirits walk among the tombs. Vincent Price is a master of that tone.

And, just as Mark twice described the four friends making a hole in the roof, Matthew builds the episode to a climax of terror by describing the disciples' fear three times. A literal translation is as follows: "They were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out from fear." The narrator first names their fear, then shows it by quoting their cry, and concludes with a short, climactic description. This is a storytelling crescendo of terror. And notice that the emphasis is on the inside views of the disciples' feelings of fear. This is an intensive inside view that appeals for equally intensive identification with the disciples. The disciples' fear is connected with the fear of the unknown, which is in turn associated with spirits and ghosts. The word *phantasma* means "an apparition," a seeing of something unknown.

The spirit of Jesus' response is total control and confidence. The episodes juxtapose the extremes of fear and calm, panic and peace. The associations of the divine name in Exodus are built into the story. Jesus relates to the disciples with the same word and attitude with which Yahweh related to Moses. The impact of these words in the story is ambiguous. On the one hand, Jesus' words are comforting. The effect is to draw us as listeners close to him. But the entire episode-his walking on the water, speaking to them while doing it and using the divine name-portrays strange and alien things. As a result, the account also creates a high degree of emotional distance from Jesus. He is clearly a person who is very different from a normal human being. He is radically "other."

Peter responds in the spirit of Jesus' command, "Have no fear." Fearlessly, he asks Jesus to call him to walk on the water. Peter's spirit is the spirit of a child who, without fear, tests the water for the first time. And Jesus' response is equally enthusiastic. I hear this episode as being full of good cheer and high adventure.

The next episode begins on the same note a ringmaster would use in describing a phenomenal feat by the tightrope walking star of the circus. It is a note of wonder and victory: "He did it!" The walking is described from an observer's point of view. But then the narrative perspective shifts. Matthew goes into Peter's head and describes first what Peter sees and then his feeling of fear. The climax of the episode is his cry of panic, its volume, loud, its tone, terror. Again, this is an extreme reversal from the confidence of his request and the success of his walking.

The major question in this story is the tone of Jesus' response. Most interpreters implicitly hear Jesus' tone as being critical, a reproof of Peter. The options are the tone of a critic or a coach. The tone is up close and personal as they stand there on the water together, with Jesus holding Peter up by the arm. And I hear Jesus' words spoken in the tone of a coach, slightly teasing and pointing out Peter's mistake clearly but with smiling disappointment-like a coach who says after a near success, "Ah, why did you lose confidence and blow it? You almost did it!" And the effect is to build confidence in the immediate aftermath of the failure by presence and support.

The story ends in a return to the calm of the story's beginning in the boat and in the appropriate response of the disciples in the boat. Unspoken but implicit is respect for Peter, who did it but couldn't sustain it. That is, the primary appeal of the story is to identify with Peter in his near miss and, from that perspective, to experience Jesus' presence and support as one who is God and has all these terrors under control.

### Connections

Connections with biblical stories move in two directions. Often we start with episodes of our own lives and seek connections with biblical stories from that perspective. The experiences of God's self-revelation are approached from within the context of our stories. The other way is to begin with the biblical stories themselves. In this approach, we let God's story establish the context for connection. The story becomes a vessel into which we can pour our own experience. But our experience is then shaped and contained in this broader story.

At the deepest level of the life of the spirit, these connections are made by God. The invitation is then to listen for the links God is seeking to make with us. And in ways that are as infinitely nuanced as the character of God and of each person, God makes those connections with us. God has chosen these stories for a particular and distinctive role in God's relationship with us. To explore our connections with these stories is to pay attention to the movement of God's Spirit within us as we learn, study, internalize, and share these stories.

The invitation is to bring to the story our deepest fears of evil powers beyond our control. These powers are symbolized here by the darkness, the wind, the loneliness of the disciples' night on the boat, and finally by Jesus himself as the unknown spirit walking on the water. What is made clear in this story is that those powers are controlled by Jesus.

The field of experience addressed by the first part of this story is the terrors of the night. A way of discovering your link with this story is then to tell the stories of your most frightening experiences. For me, these stories are connected with lonely cemeteries and empty churches at night, with sailing in sudden storms, and with vicious dogs. For others, they are connected with primary fears of heights or open spaces, of flying or being left alone.

My most vividly frightening experience occurred when I was about ten. My buddy Jim Peffley and I were sledding down in Hardscrabble Park. It was one of those days when shadows scuttled across the snow from the variations in the cloud cover. Although the park was in the middle of town, it was about a half mile wide, with a creek running down through the middle. And it was pretty desolate-lots of woods and scruffy shrubs, water moccasins in parts of the creek, and raccoons in the woods. On a hill across the park was the cemetery. Between the cemetery and where we were sledding, there was a broad field leading down to the creek and across another field to our hill. Usually there were a lot of kids sledding. But, on this particular day, no one else was there-just Jim and me. Now you also need to know that Jim had a powerful imagination, as did I. And he also liked to play tricks on me. Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer had nothing on Peffley and me.

We were having a great time on this slope. There was a little bump in the middle. If we hit it right, our sleds would fly in the air a couple of feet or so. And when we yelled, the sound would echo around the park in a lonely kind of way. Down there in the park we couldn't see anybody else at all. It was a little spooky. But the sledding was so great we didn't care. Still, I remember saying to Peffley, "Man, it sure is quiet down here." And we would stop for a second and listen to the wind and look out across that broad expanse of snow at the shadows on the snow.

We got back up to the top of the hill and were about to make another run when Peffley said, "Hey, Boomer, did you see that? Over there in the cemetery? It looked like something was moving." I looked across the valley. It was more than a quarter of a mile and I didn't see anything except some trees and the tombstones. "Nah, I don't see anything." Peffley said, "Well, it must have just been my imagination. But I'd swear I saw something movin' over there." And we looked again. But there was nothing...now.

Peffley's comment changed the atmosphere. The whole place started to look ominous—the trees, the snow—and it seemed to get darker. We kept on sledding, trying to be cheerful and to ignore the gathering gloom. But it just got scarier and scarier. Suddenly, Peffley said, "Look! It's a panther!" I looked and I swear to this day that I saw a big black panther running down through the cemetery, leaping over the fence and across that snow-covered field toward us. We turned around and ran!

Peffley had to take a different route to get to his house. So I took off alone in the other direction. I had to run through the woods for about a hundred yards. I could hear that panther behind me getting closer and closer. I had on my old clumsy boots with metal buckles. And the sled kept banging into my heels. I was terrified! Once I got out of the woods I had to run through a series of back alleys that ran behind the other houses in town to my house, a quarter mile or so. I could feel that panther getting closer and closer, about ready to pounce. Then about a hundred yards from the house, the sled banged into my heels, and I tripped and fell down. As I fell, I knew this was it! I waited for a second to feel the panther's hot breath and his claws in my back. When it didn't come, somewhat to my surprise, I scrambled up, dropped my sled rope, and ran into the house.

I was crying and absolutely panicked. Mom said, "What happened?" Trying to catch my breath, I told her, "Peffley and I saw a panther down in the park. In the cemetery. It was after me." She smiled gently, apparently knowing something about panthers I didn't know. I remember thinking that there weren't panthers in our region of the country. But panthers escape from zoos all the time. She said, "Well, who saw it?" "Peffley saw it first but then . . . It was coming across the field from the cemetery. I saw it." Mom knew my imagination, how gullible I was and susceptible to suggestion. And she also knew Peffley. She smiled again. "Okay, Peffley saw it first. Well, just take off your coat and your boots. How about some hot chocolate?"

Whenever I tell the story of Jesus and Peter walking on the water, I think of the panther and that moment when I fell down and felt it about to leap on my back, my absolute panic, and Mom's smiling calm. The stories are different but the dynamics are similar. And the stories have a similar history. Both are stories that persons told on themselves about a time when they were scared out of their minds by something that turned out to be largely a figment of their frightened imaginations. There the similarity ends. Nevertheless, it helps me to get in touch with the vitality of Matthew's story to tell my story about the panther.

With regard to Peter walking on the water, I remember another incident. Peffley was only indirectly involved in this one. We had regular challenges as to who could do the best tricks on their bikes. My blue and white sixteen-inch Western Flyer wasn't the greatest bike

in the world. But it was sturdy and rode pretty steadily. We had been through a lot together, that Western Flyer and I. One day, when I was riding up and down the road outside our house, I was trying various tricks. I could do all of them well: one foot on the handlebars, both feet on the seat and sort of standing up. Peffley was going to be impressed! I would get up some speed coming down a little hill, then I would coast and do my tricks.

It was a little risky. Since cars would come along every once in a while, I had to stay pretty close to the side of the road. And just off the pavement was loose gravel for about two feet between the road and the grass ditch. If you got caught in that gravel, you were in deep trouble.

I came up with a great idea for a trick. It was easy to put my feet up on the handlebars and balance on the seat as long as I held on to the handlebars. Why not let go, guide the bike with my feet and just sit up? Boy, would Peffley be impressed! I practiced the feel of it several times, just holding on very lightly. And then I knew I was ready.

I got up my nerve and some good speed so I could coast and relax. I put my feet up on the handlebars-it felt good! I let go of the handlebars, lightly, and got my balance. Then I leaned back slowly until I was sitting on the seat! No hands! It was like I was flying! Boy, were they going to be impressed. But then I saw a bump coming up and when I moved, the bike started to wobble. All of a sudden I was at least ten feet off the ground. I was losing it! I tried to get my hands back on the handlebars. They were too far! I couldn't make it to the grass. It was so far down to the gravel. I yelled, "Aaaaa!" The gravel came up to meet me and the bike was all over and under me. Crash! Smash!

It was my worst smash-up ever – pants torn, leg all scraped up, arm bloody. And I bent the handlebars on my Western Flyer. That moment of victory which turned into a moment of disaster is indelibly marked in my memory. I know what Peter went through when he first walked on the water and then saw the wind and was scared and began to sink. To remember my story gives me a point of connection with the dynamics of Peter's story.

For Jesus' words, I remember some experiences coaching baseball and soccer and teaching piano. In these ways, my stories are a resource for telling the stories of the Gospels. But also, because of the depth of those stories in my memory, connecting them with the Gospel stories gives them a new context. Several people have spoken in recent years of a "healing of memory." I find that making connections between my story and biblical stories does precisely that. It calls forth memories from deep within myself. Many of them are things I had completely forgotten. And by giving them a new context, it heals my memory. Some of the hurt and terror is taken away, little by little. By reliving my most traumatic experiences in the context of Christ's life, the experiences become a resource rather than something to be repressed. And in workshops, I find that telling them frees people to make their own connections with the stories in ways that are often healing for them.

### Telling the Story

The most powerful and potentially redemptive context in which to tell this story is in relation to present experiences of terror and the radical testing of faith. A question that I often ask a group that is exploring this story is "In what way are you now experiencing fears of the unknown or are doing something you have never done before and are afraid you will lose it?" After I have shared that present experience, my partner can tell me the story. No analysis, no suggestions-just active and sympathetic listening and telling the story. Then I, as a listener, am free to explore the connections that emerge from the story's interaction with my story.

There is a story about this story that I would like to share with you. It is told by Mal Bertram, pastor of The Community Church (UCC) in Syosset, New York.

Marie is a white, middle-age woman who in pastoral counseling acknowledged that she was an agoraphobic (fear of spaces). This phobia resulted in the inability to drive, extreme reluctance to leave the confines of her home, and reliance upon tranquilizers. The phobia had serious effects on her social life, requiring deceit and lying as to why she was unable to go places or accept invitations for such common things as a coffee klatch. And it created growing stress on herself and her family.

The pastor suggested the formation of a healing team drawn from a list of persons Marie felt had a depth of faith from which she could draw—not necessarily friends. Six persons were chosen. Discussion of the phobia, its impact on Marie's life, and the introduction of Matthew 14:22-23 (Jesus' walking on the water) followed. The use of space in the story, fear, and the word "courage" were studied, and these elements of the story were used as the basis for personal identification with the story by each team member. The story was learned by all the members. The story quickly became Marie's story.

We agreed that each of the team members would be available on a continual basis as a resource to Marie, in person or by phone, for her to contact when she needed to hear the story. She also was able to tell herself the story. In the course of learning the story, discussion was held around such questions as "When have I been most fearful? perplexed? puzzled? not believing what I was seeing or experiencing?"

While each member of the team related to these questions and to the story, Marie integrated her experiences of fear with each area of discussion.

Slowly Marie began to venture out of the house, drive greater distances, and to reduce her dependence on tranquilizers. She began to challenge her fear with faith. This happened within three months after the group began meeting.

The high point of the healing team's life was a coincidental invitation by the spouse of a healing team member to have a social event on a houseboat. Recognizing that this event could be filled with threat for Marie, he first withdrew the invitation apologetically. But Marie insisted, "I would like to try it." The coincidence of the houseboat, Marie's fear, and the biblical story was readily apparent to everyone. Plans were made for all to arrive at the houseboat for the retelling of the story. After the telling of the story, all ten of us embraced Marie and said to her: "Courage! Don't be afraid! I am with you!" The day was a great success and it ended with a full awareness that Marie had broken the limits imposed by her phobia. She is now 85-90 percent cured of the phobia, rarely uses tranquilizers, and has been able to face life and its challenges as a more whole human being.

The story of Marie's experience was retold widely in the Network of Biblical Storytellers. And Marie's story has had its own life history. The personal narrative that follows is shared by Judy Gorsuch. Judy and I started at Union together and became friends as she dated and then married my first-year roommate, Ken. She and Ken are co-pastors of West End Collegiate Church on the upper West Side of Manhattan.

When I was involved in a continuing education course at Union Theological Seminary in New York, I met Peg Eddy who told me about the work of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, including the story of Marie and her healing. Peg did not tell me the source of Marie's story, but I found all of it very interesting and tucked the information away in my mind for further consideration sometime.

Several months later on a very hot Sunday in July, I was liturgist for morning worship and was sitting in a large chair on the dais enjoying the sermon. The room which was being used as a temporary sanctuary because of a recent fire at our church was extremely hot and crowded that day, and I was robed in heavy vestments with long sleeves and a high collar. Suddenly I felt very hot and then faint. I was horrified at the thought of disrupting worship by fainting flat out during the sermon. I struggled to control my breathing and soon I was all right. I thought no more about it.

The next Sunday, however, sitting in the same chair during worship, the sensation of fainting returned, perhaps by association. Once again I struggled to regain control and did, but it was the same the next Sunday and the next. Soon I was beginning to be anxious about Sunday worship, not only on Sunday mornings but also for days ahead. "This is silly," I thought, "I should be able to control this," but I could not and realized that I was beginning to develop a phobic fear of fainting in worship!

Then I remembered the story that Peg had told me about Marie. I memorized the story of Jesus walking on the water in Matthew, concentrating especially on the phrase "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." On Sundays after that, if fear of fainting began to overtake me, I repeated these words to myself and pictured Jesus reaching

out to me, keeping me from sinking into anxiety. Knowing the story behind the words enabled me to feel the power of Jesus' strength and presence. Gradually over several months the fear of fainting subsided, and I was not longer plagued with anxious feelings during worship.

Almost a whole year later, I went to a conference of the Network of Biblical Storytellers in Maine and attended there a workshop led by Mal Bertram, whom I had never met. Mal started to talk about the use of biblical storytelling in pastoral work and told the story of one of his parishioners named Marie. Suddenly I realized that this was the man who, along with members of his congregation, had helped me to be healed without their ever knowing it. When the workshop was over, I told Mal how he had helped me, unbeknownst to him. We marveled at how the story had been spread and the work it had accomplished.

### **The Gospel as Storytelling in Pastoral Care**

In these stories, the potential gift of biblical storytelling in the ministry of counseling and pastoral care can be seen. When the spiritual energy of a story from the tradition of Israel connects with the spiritual needs of a person, profound new perspectives can emerge. God can be present in unique ways through these stories for persons who are afflicted.

In particular, the stories can help to change the feeling that affliction is in some sense caused by God. It is difficult to draw that conclusion unambiguously when one is remembering the stories of God's love and concern.

The stories seem to have the most appropriate meaning when told by persons who are part of a support network. Somehow the telling of personal stories about how the stories have had meaning for others gives them a context. A problem for many people is an assumption that telling or listening to the stories implies a belief that the stories are somehow magical formulas, or that you expect the same thing will happen to the person as happens in the story. Relating how others have experienced the stories provides a framework of experience that is broader and gives permission for people to listen to the stories in a variety of ways. When left free to listen, persons often make connections with the story that are surprising as well as fully appropriate. No counselor could ever foresee the helpful connections that sometimes emerge.

The role of the gospel as storytelling in counseling and pastoral care has its source in the tradition of spiritual direction. Particularly in the Ignatian tradition, meditating on the stories of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is a primary resource for hearing God's voice in the interior intimacy of the spirit. A hope is that opening ourselves to the recovery of the gospel as storytelling may provide a new context in which we can perceive and receive more fully the love of God that is there for us as a free gift.