

Water Buoyancy Put to Shame

Genesis 37:1—4; 12—28; Matthew 14:22—33

As many of us, who've been schooled with the *Adventures of Scooby Doo*, know very well—a ghost doesn't have the same worries that we have. A ghost, for example, doesn't have to worry about its house burning down in a wildfire. And a ghost, as in today's gospel reading, doesn't have to worry about sinking in the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Allegedly, supposed, according to believers in the paranormal, a ghost just floats and frightens. A ghost just hovers over the turmoil and the trauma—which, of course, is something you and I cannot do. We have to endure it. We have to evacuate. We have to shelter in place on the side of the road. Haphazardly and hurriedly, we have to grab our most precious photographs, our memory albums and our passports... and wonder about a safe place to stay.

Jesus, as we read in Matthew 14:22—33, is walking on water and, in so doing, he's defying the laws of physics. But let's be careful how we interpret what's happening here. Unlike the ghost that the disciples see at first, the ghost that terrifies them, as their boat rocks and rolls with the violent waves, Jesus isn't floating. Jesus is striding through and in the middle of all the same stuff that you and I are facing. And listen to what he says in verse 27: ***“Take heart; I AM; do not be afraid.”*** And yet, if we are afraid—afraid of the wind, afraid of the fundamental elements of universe, afraid of climate change, afraid that no one cares, afraid of the homeowner's insurance won't cover the loss, afraid of all mentally-ill arsonists still lurking in the West Plains—or simply afraid of the unknown—there is a way to displace the very fears we have of being displaced.

Namely, specifically, what I'm trying to get to is *the boat*. Remember the boat in Matthew 14. Jesus *makes* or *orders* the disciples to get into it in verse 22; and in this respect he's acting like a masterful teacher or a specialized coach; he has something in mind. What is it? On vacation, over a year ago, my spouse and my adult children stood on the dock of *McKinley's Marina* on the Alsea Bay in Oregon; and we were about to go crabbing in this little motor boat. I was nervous because, during previous years, we had gotten stuck on a sand bar. So as this old-time employee, named Merlin, gave us instructions we each gave him our attention. He distributed life jackets—check! He provided us with pieces of rancid chicken for bait. He told us how to set the traps. And then, almost as an afterthought, Merlin gestured to the running outboard motor and to this little red wire; and he said, if you pull this out too far the engine will shut down. Okay?

Well, I don't know how you handle instructions like that, but in our case, we wondered what would happen, what we should do, if the red wire was tripped by accident. What then? And to all those questions, we received the same answer: "Just don't do it." Now, believe it or not, Jesus has sent the disciples out on the open water with just that kind of dynamic in mind. *Just get in the boat and go. Be vulnerable to whatever might happen.* And throughout the Bible, of course, there are any number of horrific circumstances when the red wire *is* tripped and the people of great faith are seemingly adrift and at great risk. Isaiah 43:2 speaks to these very situations:

***When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.***

And yet, we might ask, is that good enough? Is it good enough to just read through that passage? And what if the very leather-bound book in which words like that are written happens to be burned to a crisp? Well, let's pay attention to what happens from the perspective of the boat. You see, it matters to me (and I hope to you) that we look out upon the traumatic happenings of the world *from the perspective of a community of faith that hears what they perceive to be the whisper of I AM in the wind*. And I want to emphasize how it's the *community* that's reassured and not the egocentric individual; the disciples on the boat are a community and so are we. But, for the sake of argument, please notice what happens with Peter.

It's not the first time and it won't be the last time, but Peter doubts. And I wonder if you can pinpoint when exactly that is in Matthew 14. Most people assume that it happens when he's trying to walk toward Jesus on the open sea and when he becomes frightened the waves. And yet, I would like to suggest, Peter doubts when he says, ***"Lord, if it's you..."*** And here's my evidence. That phrase, *'If it's you,'* reverberates throughout Matthew's Gospel.

- Satan in Matthew 4:6 puts Jesus to the test: ***"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down"*** from the pinnacle of the temple.
- The high priest in Matthew 26:63 puts Jesus on trial: ***"I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."***
- The crowds in Matthew 27:40 mock Jesus during his crucifixion: ***"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."***

You see, there's something strange going on with Peter that's very similar to all these situations. And that is—he wants the miracle-proof of walking on water *for himself*. Individually. And what he asks of Jesus is a ***"command"***— some further instruction. Hmmm.

In the 1973 musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, there's a song lyric which is sung by the character of Herod Antipas. Known as '*Herod's Song*'—it's intended to illustrate the kind of mockery that Jesus went through; and here are the words which relate to today's gospel reading:

“So if you are the Christ, yes, the great Jesus Christ
Prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool...”

Now, that's kind of funny. But, in a way, I think it betrays the quintessential misunderstanding of how Jesus most often makes himself known to a community of faith. Most people are under the impression that the water surface Jesus walks on is calm and placid—as if this whole world were a domesticated, chlorinated and well-skimmed swimming pool. But that's not the case.

Matthew's Gospel describes a water-surface which is extremely rough and choppy—which is reminiscent of other passages in the Bible, where the froth and foment of each wave is a sign of primordial chaos. Primordial chaos!—as in Genesis, chapter one, verse two: ***“the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”*** And, let's keep going. Psalms 46, 65, 74, 77, 89, 93 and 107 all emphasize the same kind of chaos—and where's God? I can report the Holy One who led the Hebrews through the Sea of Reeds and spoke to Moses through a burning bush is not lounging on some inner tube in the middle of a swimming pool. God is striding in the middle of chaos and never floating over it. And, according to Job 38:16, whenever an egocentric individual purports to do this on their own, he says, ***“Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?”*** So, no swimming pool. No styrofoam noodle. No inflatable raft. And such is the faith of those who stay in the boat as it traverses the unpredictable waters, in between where it's been and where it's going.

Now where are you going? Where are we? Before all the craziness and commotion of last Saturday and Sunday I had gone to see *The Odyssey*—an IMAX film rendition of Homer’s epic poem. And let me tell you—spoiler alert—not only is this film extraordinarily louder than it has to be, every crew-member on the boat dies and only Odysseus makes it home to Ithaca on a few planks of debris. Let me repeat that: *everyone dies*. And primarily they die because the Greek God of the Sea, Poseidon, wants to punish them; and so they die. Matthew’s Gospel, by contrast, doesn’t want us to be afraid—not even of death. Moreover, as far as any individualized heroes are concerned, Jesus does not indulge them. And in Peter’s case he says, ***“You of little faith! Why did you doubt?”*** And what this foundational ‘rock’ of the church doubts is whether or not the Son of God is actually in the mix of this mayhem.

This week, as many of you are well aware, people have been displaced from their homes. And I get how being at home, and having the privacy of a home, is a great comfort. But the goal of Jesus walking on the water isn’t for you and I to duplicate the miracle and get safely back to the comforts of home. It’s to go to that place (perhaps in our hearts and in our minds) where we’ve never been before. The other side of the sea. And along the way:

Oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free—
Rolling as a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me!
Underneath me, all around me
Is the current of His love...