

WALKING ON WATER IS NOT OPTIONAL

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As I read this famous gospel passage of Jesus walking on the water I was also remembering a portion of the parish profile that you wrote now almost 4 and a half years ago. I was thinking about the part that listed what you were looking for in a rector. I remember looking at all the desired traits that you were searching for and like many of these descriptions of a rector I was thinking, I'm not sure even Jesus could measure up to these requirements. Then the committee added the line that walking on water was a desired, but not required skill for your rector. There may be far more truth in this statement than the search committee was aware of and the ability to walk on water may just be an important skill for all of us. Hold on to that thought while I unpack some of the symbolism of this passage.

First of all there is image of separation of Jesus from the disciples. He has sent them on ahead while he goes and prays. The boat is clearly a long way from shore and is having a rough time of it.

Today many of us do not understand what water meant to a group of people from a mostly desert culture. I imagine it may be like when some of those men and women from the Midwest enlist in the Navy and find themselves confronted by the vastness of the ocean for the first time. We may not think about it but I imagine those of you have spent time on the water especially far out at sea understand the power of water.

In the time of Jesus and for the ancient Hebrews, water was the ultimate symbol for chaos. People did not sail very far out of the sight of land. They sailed but stayed close to shore. In biblical terms think in terms of the creation story and Noah. The land is created out of the watery chaos. God speaks, the sea parts and dry land is formed.

In the flood story of Noah it is not just rain that floods the earth, but the earth breaks open and the waters of chaos that are under the earth break free to engulf everything and destroy it. The ancient view of the world was more like we were a huge island floating on the sea of chaos and only God could keep it contained.

In biblical times water was an impediment: Think in terms of the Red Sea and Jordan River. The way of the Jews is blocked in Exodus by the Red Sea. It is God that parts the waters and allows them to escape only to see the chaos return to engulf the Egyptians. On their final entry after the 40 years the Jordan River is parted so they can enter the Promised Land.

In Jonah the sea is a place of judgment. Jonah has disobeyed God and the sea is his place of judgment. Once thrown into the sea the waters are calmed.

Psalms 107: 23-32 speaks of God calming the seas and trampling down the waves. This is the famous "Some went down to the sea in ships" passage.

So into all of these images of water from the Hebrew scriptures Matthew tells this story of Jesus coming across the chaotic waters to the terrified disciples. Now it is not entirely clear if they are more afraid of the storm or of the vision of Jesus coming to them walking over the water. This is a huge revelation to the disciples for Jesus is doing something that only God can do. Only God has dominion over the waters of chaos and here is Jesus coming to them over the chaos in total and complete control. Now just this by itself would be story enough, but Matthew introduces something else.

The unique piece in this scene from Matthew is the part played by Peter. Good old Peter, once again shows us his ever so human side. Peter in the second half of Matthew is often a representative of the 12 disciples. He does, says or acts on behalf of all of them both in their strength and in their weakness.

The water (chaos) separates Peter from Jesus. Peter says, if it really is you, call me to come to you. Peter steps into the chaos and begins to cross. As the enormity of what he is doing hits him, he panics and begins to sink. Jesus however is there to take his hand and save him from the chaos.

Jesus says, you of little faith. Now I had to make a decision this morning on how to say that. How many of you reading this put this in a harsh or exasperated tone of voice? Many of us feel that if we just had more faith life would be so much better. Many view this as a harsh judgment of Peter and ourselves by Jesus. Notice however that I chose a tone of voice that was almost amused or humorous.

Peter's experience is an example of what Richard Rohr writes about in his latest book, Falling Upward. Richard spends a great deal of this book on how we grow in Grace by falling and failing. We give our lives over to God when we are in trouble, but then take it back when things go smoothly. I'll take your help while the water is rough, but on the calm days I'll just run things myself thank you. Well at least until I need you again. Each time we fall, each time we fail we have the opportunity to grow in our faith, to grow in our understanding of grace and in our ability to accept that grace.

In this story there are really just three characters, Jesus, Peter and the rest of the disciples. What is key is that only Peter is willing to get out of the boat. The other disciples do nothing until Jesus gets into the boat and then they are ready to worship him.

How many of us are trapped in these walls hoping somebody else will go out. Mark you do it, that's your job. After all walking on water was in your job description even if we thought it was a joke.

What if walking on water in this metaphorical sense is required of a rector? What if it is not required of just a rector but of each and every member of the church? Madelyn Engle states that we can all walk on water, the problem is that we have forgotten how to do it!

The question I wish to leave you with is what is the chaos in your life that appears to separate you from Jesus? What is the chaos that makes you want to sit in the boat like the disciples? Lord knows there is an awful lot of chaos out there in today's world. There are many things to be fearful of, many things that can get in the way of our ability to follow the teachings of Christ. But remember the passage from Romans two weeks ago. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing in this world or anywhere can separate us. There are no waters of chaos that can stand between Jesus and us. So get out of the boat and start walking. Oh you may start to sink just like Peter, but remember, every time you begin to sink, Jesus is standing there with his hand stretched to bolster your faith and receive you into his loving arms.