

“ Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:33)¹

It's interesting, and often surprising, how little things can get out of control. Two years ago, I spent the Fourth of July holiday, with my family in North Carolina. That evening, the cul-de-sac was buzzing with excitement for the evening's fireworks. Not being comfortable with fireworks in uncontrolled settings, I sat a little apart from the group. The show progressed from sparklers to much more powerful displays. The colors and shapes produced “ooh's and aah's”, and sometimes, the embers fell just a little too close for comfort. Then, a new type of fireworks was introduced, which was not airborne, that skittered along the ground producing colorful sparks. The first two died out midway the cul-de-sac. However, the third one traveled from one side of the cul-de-sac to the other side, landing on a neighbor's lawn. Within seconds, a small blaze had erupted on the lawn! After a few moments of panic, someone found a hose and extinguished the fire, which was steadily growing and could have had a different outcome.

After feeding the 5000, Jesus had first dismissed the disciples and then, the crowd. When the disciples entered the boat that evening, they had no idea that conditions on the water would produce a situation over which they had so little control. After all, they were seasoned, experienced fishermen. Their little boat trip to the other side should have taken a couple of hours. Instead they found themselves in a very perilous situation, battling the rough water and wind gales as the boat drifted further from land, out to sea.

¹ YrA9Aug2020_Pr14, Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b ; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus, still mourning the death of his cousin, John the Baptizer Jesus had retreated to the mountain, alone, to pray, and be closer to God. After all, the mountain is God's realm, the symbolic house of God. However, we don't need to think that in order to pray to God, we need to find a mountain. John's death represented the uncertainty and turbulence of his time. Each era of human existence has its trials. Jesus' example tells us that it is in turbulent times, we must continue to pray and believe in the power of prayer. For prayer is a necessity in our lives, just like air, just like water.

Symbolically, water is more than mere "water". Note that in the beginning... "*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*" (Gen. 1:2). On other words, God created order from the watery chaos. And the power of God over water is shown in the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17), the parting of the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21) and Joshua's entry into the Promised Land through the swollen River Jordan (Josh. 3:14-17). Thus, the disciples find themselves battling the primordial elements but the disciples are not the God who has control over water and wind. It is Jesus who can and does. It is Jesus who transforms ordinary water into wine (John 2:1-11) and well water into "living water (John 4:4-26)". And it is Jesus only who walks on the water.

It's strange to think of elements of this gospel as *memes*, especially since the gospel has been around longer than the word *meme*. A *meme* is an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture (especially, those that are spread through the internet and

social media).² The phrase “walking on water” is a meme, a metaphor for the impossible, the miracle and more importantly, the godly thing that no mortal can do. The disciples weren’t thinking of memes when they saw Jesus walking towards them. They were thinking bad news: demon, ghost, unfriendly spirit, very bad outcome.

Then the voice Jesus comes to them over the water: “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” (v.17). Peter puts Jesus to the test: if you are who you say you are, then “command me to come to you on the water”. That’s a strange test. I think I would have said “calm the sea” or “get us to land quickly”. But we applaud Peter for having the courage to step out of the boat, to respond to Jesus’ command “Come”. And that’s the second meme: *stepping out in faith*: to leave what we “know” and face the “unknown”. Jesus gave Peter no other instructions other than “come”. No other assurance. Like a toddler taking those first, brave, tentative steps, then abruptly sitting down; Peter walks on water, and starts to sink when the wind distracts him: “*Lord, help me!*”

And then the third meme: “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*” (v. 31). These words of Jesus have found their way into popular usage, applied to any situation where disbelief trumps belief, from the ridiculous to the sublime. However, does Jesus rebuke Peter? or is this a display of compassion? I think Jesus looks at Peter through the eyes of compassion, so Peter is not being scolded and berated, as some would think. The same Jesus who had compassion for the 5000, can see that Peter has been shaken by the storm and by the appearance of Jesus in

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meme>

such an unexpected manner. In those situations over which we have little control, Jesus' comment to Peter is to remind us of where to place our faith. The storm of this past week reminded us of the power of nature, the damage for some of us from the wind and water, the chaos and the stress of a troublesome situation if we had the misfortune of losing power. In the middle of a pandemic, the world still goes on: hurricanes will come, accidents occur and people get sick for reasons other than COVID-19. And it is so easy to become anxious and afraid.

Jesus simply asks that we believe in him - that we nurture the seed of faith we have been given, that we anchor ourselves in prayer like Jesus did, that we are bold in our confession of faith like the disciples were :

“Truly you are the son of God” (v. 33),

because if we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved (Romans 10:9).

Please pray for God's saving and healing grace for those who are sick with COVID-19, for the souls of those who have died from COVID-19, for all those who work to keep us safe from COVID-19; pray for God's mercy for our church, our families, our friends, our country and for the world. +