

Sermon, August 9, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends and St. Mark's music directors Debi and Sean Beachy, who will provide special music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases are at an all-time high nationally, and rising again in Maryland; and many, if not most of our members are either in a high-risk group, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger any of them unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)
Now today's stupid joke.

My neighbors are arguing over their vacation, planned for the end of the month. This year SHE wants to go to the beach and HE wants to go to the mountains. He said, "The beach isn't safe this year." She said, "But cool mountain air might disagree with me." He said, "It wouldn't dare!"

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve. Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we

are not worthy to ask, except through the merit of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

A reading from First Kings, the nineteenth chapter.

At [Horeb, the Mount of God, Elijah] came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and

you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.

Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the fourteenth chapter.

[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee], while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them 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 in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Actually, I'm the one who should have planned a vacation this month. That way I wouldn't be struggling trying to figure out and/or rationalize biblical miracle stories over these weeks.

But today I have some help, thanks to Dr. Doron Nof, a professor of Oceanography at Florida State University whose worldwide climate research is funded in part by the National Science Foundation and NASA. Professor Nof headed up a climate study of the Sea of Galilee a while back, from which he postulated a rare combination of physical phenomena that may logically explain today's so-called miracle. Nof cites a feasible combination of optimal water and atmospheric conditions which may have caused localized surface freezing of the Sea of Galilee. His research team labeled the phenomena, "springs ice."

Don't laugh, because he did find geological evidence of two unusual cold snaps in Northern Israel about two thousand years ago. Nof thinks it possible that patches of the lake surface quick-froze in the storm that night and Jesus was actually walking on, or perhaps even sliding on the surface of the ice.

Okay now you can laugh. Because this story is told not only in Matthew, but also in Mark and John; and while the accounts are all slightly different, not one of them says it was cold or mentions Jesus performing toe loops, sit-spins or triple salchows on his way to the boat.

Professor John Duncan Martin Derrett at the University of London has a different idea. He says “accreting deltaic deposits” were probably behind this particular miracle.

Derret explains that gravel and sea shells periodically build up the edge of the delta formed by currents where the upper Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee. He says that often leaves a strip of solid, walkable ground that in the face of a strong northeast wind would be just an inch or two beneath the water’s surface.

Of course, Professor Derrett really can’t explain why a boatful of disciples, many of whom were career Sea of Galilee fishermen wouldn’t somehow have known that too. And there WAS something about this event that clearly freaked them out, wasn’t there? Something other, I would guess, than a guy walking on a pile of gravel and seashells.

In exploring the realm of possibility for this story’s natural underpinnings, let’s not forget about the basilisk. That’s the Central American lizard that actually does walk on water. At least sort of. Those lizards are often seen running frantically across the surface of SMALL ponds, thanks to two very large back feet that have flaps of skin between the toes.

Those flaps trap pockets of air on the water’s surface, and the surface tension provides just enough buoyancy for the lizards to run on top. Not coincidentally, locals DO call the Basilisk “the Jesus Lizard.”

Zoologists say that after fifteen feet or so the basilisks usually tire out,

slow down and sink, so if the pond is large, they have to swim the rest of the way. Based on today's story, I'm thinking maybe they should call the "Jesus Lizard" the "Peter Lizard."

A couple of biblical language scholars, including Heinrich Paulus—who came to my rescue last week, claimed that the original Greek words $\text{peri pa tw}^{\frac{1}{2}}\text{n e) pi i th \ n qa / l a s s a n w}$ hich we translate as "walking ON the sea" could also mean "walking ALONG the sea." So they think maybe Jesus was just taking a leisurely stroll on the beach when the disciples spotted him from the boat. But then again John's version of the story says the boat was twenty-five or thirty stadia off shore--that's three or four miles.

If Jesus WAS just strolling the beach at night they couldn't possibly have seen him from that distance. Besides, if Jesus was standing on the beach, why would Peter sink right beside him?

The most rational explanation I've read so far is that this event happened after the resurrection, rather than before. There certainly are other instances where the RISEN Jesus showed up places not normally considered possible—like out of thin air in a locked room. And also times when the risen Jesus was oddly difficult to recognize, like in the cemetery garden, and on the road to Emmaus. Well maybe.

But after further review, I think it's probably best to forget all about the "How" of this story, and focus instead on the "Why?"

First of all, the disciples in the boat would have known exactly what it meant when Jesus walked on the sea. They were, after all, good Jewish boys, who surely learned from the Prophets, the Psalms and the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible that only God can walk on the sea.

Job chapter nine, verse eight asks, “who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea? (Well... It’s God, that’s who!) Isaiah forty-three verse sixteen reads, “thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters...” So it’s no wonder that just after Jesus also walked on the sea the disciples first recognized and worshiped him as the “Son of God.”

Matthew’s first readers were probably more interested in the guys on the boat than the guys on the water. And I’m thinking maybe we should be too.

We know the early churches all had their share of difficulties, none more so than Matthew’s. It was likely a group of Jewish Christians, rejected and persecuted first by their Gentile neighbors for being Jewish; but then later by their own friends and even families because their Christian beliefs made them somehow not quite Jewish enough anymore.

They too had faith—at least a little. They believed the Son of God dwelt among us in the past and trusted he would come again in the future. In other words, like the guys in the boat, they knew Jesus would indeed be waiting “on the other side” once they got there; but that wasn’t a whole lot of help to folks still stuck here in the middle, struggling to get by, one day at a time.

You’ve probably heard a common idiom for being perplexed, confused or just feeling lost. Such a person is often described as being “at sea.” And I’ve never really thought about that expression much until the last couple of weeks when I’ve been wrestling with today’s miracle story while spending a fair amount of time speaking with folks who are scared and struggling.

Thanks to the current pandemic, some are struggling with their careers. For others its finances or family. Some have relationship or legal problems. Some are just lonely, and hate been stuck at home. And still others are caught up in the middle of their own health crises.

Sometimes the simple cures for illness turns out not to be so simple. And the most promising treatments don't always pan out. For a couple of friends coping with long-term illness, doctors are trying something completely new these days, mostly because all the old things have stopped working. Even for people of faith, this boat can be a pretty lonely and frightening place, on any given stormy night.

Sure, we trust Jesus to meet us on the other side, like the disciples did. He promised as much. But that's not always enough, is it? So I can't help but think the message intended for us in today's miracle story is the same one that pretty much jumped right out at me during our first reading. That despite how dark things sometimes seem, take heart. Because God cares for us, loves us and is with us in the here and now. Even though not necessarily in the ways or places we might expect.

Elijah didn't find God in the mighty wind. Or for that matter the raging fire. Or the terrible earthquake. Elijah instead found God in the same unexpected place where WE usually find him. In the calm. And in the silence. And not just up ahead waiting, but standing at our sides and having our backs. To help and support us, as we face-up to life's many challenges. Especially the ones that would likely overwhelm us, if we had to face them all alone. Thankfully, we don't.

So especially during these long, lonely and stormy nights, let's remember God is always coming to us, as if walking on the sea. Where all we have to do is reach out like Peter, and cry out, or just whisper in the silence, "Lord, save me." And he does.

Even if he really arrives by skating on the ice. Or walking on gravel. Or strolling the beach, God's presence alone, is no less a miracle.

Amen
