

Jesus told the disciples to get into a boat. He dismissed the crowd. It has been a busy time. He has been teaching, and now is a time for respite, a well-earned break. The disciples set sail. At this point, I want to pause; I want to hear more about the boat. What kind was it? What was the sea-state? Who was at the helm? There are lots of questions, but the Bible directs our attention to follow Jesus. Eventually, we will see him walk on water. Just like in our daily lives, we can learn something about God, if we can only focus and not get distracted by other things. Following God means taking risks, but sometimes the risks God calls us to take are different than what we imagine they would be.

This story is in both Matthew and Mark, but Matthew adds some details to the Markan version and cleans up some of the confusing geography. I find it interesting that Luke, who had access to Mark, does not include this story. Most likely, even first-century readers had trouble accepting the miraculous event. In Matthew, we find a rich variation of the story, with symbols, like water, a storm, and the boat. Even when Jesus goes off to pray alone, his separateness is a harbinger of the church in the world. The disciples will face the storm without Jesus physically with them, just as the church exists in the world without Jesus' physical presence. And, just as we have the Holy Spirit with us, Jesus rejoins the disciples.

Like the other three gospels, Matthew came after the resurrection. We read the words, as if, they are happening in real time. Yet, they are a memory, seen through post-Easter lenses. Instead of tripping over the miracle, like Luke's early readers might have done, we seek the meaning. Our modern minds hear the story of Jesus walking on water and we think about defying the law of gravity. Or, a century ago, readers inspired by Rudolf Bultmann sought to demythologize the miracle.<sup>1</sup> They might say, Jesus was on a reef or in shallow water. Yet, God does not worry about the physical laws. So, we seek a theological reading of this story.

God overcomes chaos. The Greek word for walking, in this verse, is *περιπατω*, meaning "to tread all around" or "walk at large." Gene Boring interprets it to mean "conquest." The sea is a symbol of the "active power that threatens the goodness of life." Boring writes, "To be as sea evokes images of death."<sup>2</sup> The story is about the authority of Jesus. He walks (conquers) on the sea (death). This larger section in Matthew (13:53-17:27) is the formation of the new community. Jesus is pulling away from public life. His relationship with the disciples deepens, as does his opposition. He continues to challenge the crowds but they neither reject him nor become disciples. Now, he Jesus goes up the mountain to pray alone.<sup>3</sup>

Who is this that prays? How do we react to him? Do we rush from our faith community to find him? Or, do we travel with our company as instructed? Jesus told them to "go on ahead to the other side." The wind pushed the disciples away from the shore. Even for seasoned sailors, like the disciples, storms are hard work. When the deck sways to and

fro, it takes energy just to remain in one place. First, you must tense muscles to keep from having your legs buckle. Then, you can relax to keep from getting knocked over. Alternating flexing and relaxing, tensing and letting go—this goes on throughout a storm. And, it had been going on all night.

The disciples might not have liked the storm. Some might have been afraid, but they were probably handling it. There is an old saying, "We cannot change the wind, but we can adjust our sails." They were adjusting and working. The Bible does not say the disciples were afraid of the storm. It says, "...the wind was against them." Literally, the wind was *εναντιος* or "contrary." When Jesus walks on the sea, symbolizing conquering death, then they are afraid. They say, "It is a ghost!"

Who is this that walks on water? Jesus says, *εγω ειμι*, or, "It is I." This might not sound like much to us, but Jesus quotes the Septuagint, or Greek translation, of Exodus 3:14. Moses asks, "What shall I say is the name of the one who sent me?" God says, "Tell them I am (YHWH) sent you." This does not mean that Matthew conflates Jesus and YHWH. Recall, Jesus had just been praying to YHWH. Instead, this passage is about God's presence being mediated by Jesus and Jesus being present in the community of faith. God is with us.

In the early morning hours, in the glimmer of the light of sunrise, when the disciples' energy was almost spent, Peter yells above the wind and waves, "Lord, let me come to you." Jesus said, "Come." The faith step is not getting out of the boat.<sup>4</sup> It would be easy to envision Peter as the model for responding to God and taking risks. Instead, Peter represents the disciples. The boat is the community of faith. He leaves the community. And, when he is alone, he sees the violence of the storm. Then, he begins to sink.<sup>5</sup>

The real risk is not stepping out of the boat. It is leaving the community. Taking risks for God means staying in the community and moving together in faith. When the violence of the storms of life crash all around, standing alone is almost impossible. When Peter noticed the waves, he became afraid and started to sink. "Save me, Jesus!" He shouted!

Jesus took Peter's hand and led him back into the boat. He led Peter back into the community. Then, the wind ceased. What are the risks God is calling us to take? Financial? Missions? Discipleship? Justice ministries? These are questions each one of us can answer individually. We do not have to leave the boat to answer. We remain in our faith community, and we listen to what God is saying.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 328.

<sup>3</sup> Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, and Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A: After Pentecost 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 111.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get out of the Boat* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Boring, in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 328.