

Jesus insisted that the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side. Having sent the crowds away, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray, remaining there alone as night fell.

Meanwhile the boat, already a thousand yards from shore, was being tossed about in the waves which had been raised by the fierce winds. At about three in the morning, Jesus came walking toward them on the lake. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were terrified. “It is a ghost!” they said, and in their fear they began to cry out. Jesus hastened to reassure them: “Don’t worry, it’s me! Don’t be afraid!”

Peter spoke up and said, “If it is really you, tell me to come to you across the water.” “Come!” Jesus said. So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was, he became frightened. He began to sink, and cried out, “Save me!” Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught Peter. “You have so little faith!” Jesus said to him. “Why did you doubt?”

Once they had climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat showed great reverence, declaring to Jesus, “You are indeed God’s Own!”

~ Matthew 14:22-33



That’s an incredible story, in every sense of the word. We usually say something is “incredible” when it’s amazing or perhaps unexpected, like an incredible Super Bowl comeback or an incredible concert or an incredibly delicious dessert.

Some of you have heard of the “Jesus Christ lizard,” technically the basilisk lizard of Central America. These creatures can move so fast that they literally run on water, for a short distance. Pretty awesome. But we can do the math, measuring how much force they generate with their legs, combined with the surface area that their feet cover on the water and the counterbalance of the tail, the physics check out. It’s cool--but not incredible.



When I was in grade 8, my Christian school gave bonus points to science fair projects that had some kind of Bible connection. I remember that some kid did experiments with the surface tension of water, trying to work out a scientific explanation of how there might have been some kind of phenomenon with the density of the lake water that day allowing Jesus to float or walk on it.

A creative project, and far more interesting than my project growing corn seeds, but still. The point of a miracle story is just how supernatural the miracle is! If there’s an observable, repeatable, scientific explanation for the phenomenon, then it’s not incredible.

This story of Jesus walking on water is meant to be unbelievable.

That’s kind of the point.

The climax of the story is that moment between Jesus and Peter: “O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Why did you doubt? Because this is incredible, that’s why.

You can’t rationalize your way to believing this story. No science fair project is going to prove that it’s actually possible to walk on water. And really, you wouldn’t want it to. If you can prove that it’s possible, then the whole story goes limp.

This story matters because of *exactly how* unbelievable it is.

So let’s not get off track on the question “did this *actually* happen or not?”

If it did happen, you're going to have to take the writer's word for it, because there's no proof--and proof would diminish the value of the story.

And if it didn't happen, well, the writers tell the story as if it did. If it's a fable or an exaggeration, then they're using that literary device to do something that they believed *in*. In this case, they're telling this story to give their interpretation of the life of Jesus. And what they think of Jesus is so incredible, that the only way they can explain that is to tell incredible stories about him.

They know that the story they're telling is unbelievable, yet they tell it anyway.

So either way, we have to choose whether we're going to believe the writers or not.

Since it comes down to a choice, the question of authenticity matters less to me than the follow-up question: what's the point? What is the meaning of this story? What are the writers trying to teach their audience?

incredible!
~~what actually happened?~~
What can we learn?

Now *that's* a question that we can get to the bottom of.

This is a story full of symbolism.

Here are some highlights from what could easily be a 3-hour lecture:

This story comes right in the middle section of the gospel, as Jesus is traveling around the region of Galilee, mostly teaching and healing people of their illnesses and disabilities.

Now, I'm sure someone out there knows that this story from Matthew 14 isn't the first time that Jesus and his friends are out on the lake during a storm. That's right, the first time happened in Matthew chapter 8. That day, Jesus was taking a nap in the boat when a storm struck. The disciples were terrified and woke him up, and Jesus "rebuked the winds and the sea" and the storm calmed. And the disciples were amazed, saying "who is this guy, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

Who is this Jesus?

That question rings throughout this section of Matthew, raised again when Jesus travels to his hometown of Nazareth. Where other towns had been thrilled by the presence of this traveling miracle worker, Nazareth is less enthusiastic. *“Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? ... Where then did this man get all this?”* And they took offense at him.

Somebody’s getting too big for his britches, we might say where I come from.

Next comes the death of John the Baptist. Now, John also had some doubts about Jesus. A couple of chapters earlier, while John was in prison, he had sent messengers to Jesus, asking his cousin: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” And Jesus didn’t really answer the question, but told John to trust his eyes, that the proof of *who Jesus is* is evident by *what Jesus does*.

Now, John has been killed before we find out if he was satisfied with Jesus’ answer. For the followers of Jesus, they’re starting to recognize that they’re playing for high stakes. Trusting Jesus is going to cost them. They had better be sure he’s worth following.

When Jesus hears about John’s death, he’s upset--this is his cousin! So he goes off into the wilderness to be alone.

But a crowd tracks him down, and he’s moved by pity and again heals the sick.

Next comes the famous “feeding of the 5000,” as the crowd is hungry and Jesus miraculously provides food for them in the wilderness.

Then comes the part we read, as Jesus goes off again by himself, up a mountain this time, and sends the disciples away on their boat. He’ll meet them on the other side, he says, mysteriously...

That night, the storm hits the boat, Jesus and Peter walk on water, and Jesus’ calms the storm.

In the morning, they land at Gennesaret, a region known for its fertile farmlands, whose [name means “garden of riches.”](#) Where “the people of that place *recognize*” Jesus and tell all of their neighbours to come see him and be healed.

So that’s the outline of this section of Matthew.

Matthew 14-ish

Traveling in Galilee – WHO IS JESUS???

- first storm calming – Who is wind/wave master? (ch 8)
- rejected in Nazareth – who does he think he is? (ch 13)
- death of John the Baptist – “are you the One?” (14:1-12)

- Jesus leaves to the wilderness (v13)
 - miracle of food in the desert (14-21)
 - goes up a mountain (22-23)
 - WIND AND WAVES (23-33)
 - Gennesaret – “garden of riches” (34-36)

The setup is this echoing question: *who is Jesus?*

And then the answer comes in the form of a story where the hero goes into the wilderness, feeds a bunch of people, goes up a mountain, then tames a wild body of water to get to a land that is, shall we say, a land full of promise?

What story does this look like? (Somebody, anybody??...It's been a while since I've had a chance to ride this particular hobby horse...)

The Exodus story of the ancient Hebrews' escape from slavery in Egypt and journey to their homeland: Wilderness, mountain, miraculous food, and an incredible water crossing to reach “the Promised Land.”

And in the Exodus story, who is the one who controls the wild water? Who tames it in order to bring people safely to the other side?

YHWH. The God of Israel, the one whose name is “I Am.”

Everyone is asking, “who is this guy?” And Jesus responds by calming the storm, by walking above the chaos of the deep water, by doing what only God does.

As my seminary professor Rikk Watts loved to point out, nobody expected the Messiah to calm storms. Healing the sick, reforming the law, proclaiming a new kingdom, that was Messiah stuff. But here, on the water, Jesus's actions declare that he is more than Messiah, he is in some mysterious way, the presence of YHWH in the flesh.

And so we shouldn't be surprised when Jesus responds to the disciples' fear by saying, "Take heart, *ego eimi*" I AM.

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EXO'DUS
"I AM"

And then comes the best part. Peter.

Peter spoke up and said, "If it is really you, tell me to come to you across the water." "Come!" Jesus said. So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was, he became frightened. He began to sink, and cried out, "Save me!" Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught Peter. "You have so little faith!" Jesus said to him. "Why did you doubt?"

"Prove it." Peter says, "if you are who you claim to be, prove it."

That's the call of the student and the skeptic: empirical data, an experiment with verifiable results.

If this is legit, let's test it out.

So Jesus says, "Come". And Peter, as usual straddling the line between bravery and stupidity, steps out of the boat.

And then he walks across at least some small distance of water towards Jesus.

And then he remembers the storm and realizes what he's doing, and starts to sink.

And he cries out, "Save me!"

Is it pushing the Exodus parallels too far to hear echoes of the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, "Deliver Us!"? And as YHWH had promised Moses long before, The Sacred One hears the cry and stretches out his arm to deliver the one he loves.

And then comes the climax: "O you of little faith, Why did you doubt?"

The Greek phrase here reads like a pet name: *Oligopistos* "Small Faith." Jesus has called his disciples this twice already in Matthew's gospel, including at the first calming of the storm. And he'll say it twice more, for it will take a while for this lesson to sink in.

Oligopistos - "Little/few" + "faith"
edistasas - "two/double" + "stance"

"Little faith, why do you doubt?" *edistasas* - double stances, standing in two places, both here and there, wavering, hesitating. *Why won't you commit to this?*

This question rings louder than the moment. After all the disciples have seen, after all they've already given up to follow Jesus, why do they waver?

Now, honestly, I gotta say this a little bit unfair that this critique is aimed at Peter. It seems a little petty to criticize the faith of the one dude that actually got out of the boat!

So I suspect that, if this was a film, this is the shot where the camera focuses on Jesus' face, and he looks up and "breaks the fourth wall," speaking not just to Peter but to the audience: You there, you with the little faith, why are *you* wavering?"

"You have so little faith!" Jesus said. "Why do you doubt?"



And that's it, isn't it. The thing that we're supposed to learn from this story.

Why *do* we waver? After everything we've seen, all that we've been taught, all that we've committed to and believed and deconstructed and reclaimed, why do we waver?

I'd say it's because it turns out that faith is *always* a choice.

You can't be convinced of faith. You can't be talked into it. You can't learn your way to God, you can't think your way to a connection with the Sacred. (Take it from a guy with a Master of Divinity title hanging around his neck!) You'll never learn something or see something that will prove your faith once and for all.

You can literally walk on water, you can even be *in the middle of walking on water*. And you'll still have doubts. Even if you're right there when Jesus walks on water and calms the storm.

Faith is a choice. You have to choose, over and over again, will you trust or won't you?

You will waver, so as you waver, who will you trust?

This isn't a rebuke of informed scepticism or a call to blind faith. Jesus didn't reject Peter's experiment, he welcomed it. The scriptures are a celebration of intelligence and creative beauty. There's so much to study and learn, so many connections and explanations and thought experiments. But all the learning and experiencing can only take you so far.

Pastor Bruxy Cavey, from *The Meeting House* in Ontario, says that faith invites us to follow the evidence wherever it leads, to pursue learning and logic and facts as far as they will go, and then you will always come to a place where you have to take a leap.

We don't know everything. We can't know everything. We will waver. And so we must *choose* faith, in something.

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

At the end of this story, the disciples all bowing down to Jesus, saying "Surely...truly...certainly...you Are the Son of God."

In that moment, they had seen enough to convince them, this is the Son of God. They believed.

For almost two whole chapters. Until they were tired and hungry and complaining that somebody had forgot to pack the lunch, again. "O Little Faith..." comes the callback.

That's what it is to be human, to learn and know and choose, and then to forget and to have the situation change, to come up with new questions and new struggles... We have to choose again and again.

For the disciples, and the gospel writers that their witness inspired, the thing they kept choosing, kept coming back to after Jesus' was gone, was this determination that Jesus is the Son of God.

If you shop at Superstore, you've probably seen the new bright blue shopping bins, with this written on it. "The Mother of All Bins."

What a strange statement. How is this bin a mother? Does it give birth to other bins? Does it share its DNA? Does it nurture, protect and raise offspring, sharing joy at their successes and weeping with their struggles? The wise mother bin, watching over her little binlets...

No? Then how is this bin a mother of all bins?



Of course, it's a figure of speech. This is *the best* bin, this bin is bigger, sturdier, more efficient and well-balanced than any other. This bin is what all other bins aspire to be.

This bin captures the *essence* of the bin.

(And let me tell you, I'm on board with that! This bin has vastly improved my grocery shopping experience!)

The mother of all bins.

That's fairly close to the way the culture and language of the gospel writers understood the phrase "Son of ... " The disciples James and John were called "the Sons of Thunder." That wasn't a slight at their real dad, Zebedee; nobody was saying that Thunder had conceived a child with his wife. James and John weren't the Offspring of Thunder, but something in their spirits reminded people of thunder.

So when Jesus is called "Son of God," his followers weren't picturing a literal father and son relationship, and they weren't imagining a fully-formed theology of the Trinity. They were thinking that Jesus somehow captured the essence of God in his person. His spirit was like God's spirit. He was *full of* God, doing the things that God does.

Now, I know that Jesus' father-son relationship with Creator God was developed theologically into something more complex than that. I'm not arguing with any of that.

But I think it's meaningful to understand where that theology came from. It grew out of the experience of these first followers, who didn't understand and didn't believe what they were seeing most of the time. But what they *knew* at some level was that when they were with Jesus, they were with God. In a personal, dynamic, incomprehensible and powerful way.

And that awareness calmed their storms and, eventually, helped them find the courage to step out of the boat.

The invitation for these folks of little faith, was to lean into that awareness of God's Presence with them, to choose to trust it more and more often, to let that knowledge guide the rest of their story, even as they wavered.

I hope this sermon is a good example of what is possible when we use our minds to “unwrap the Bible.” There is so much to learn! These aren’t just Sunday School tales for children. These are right there with the best of literature, “the mother of all books”, you might say. :)

The question “what can we learn” is a powerful question that the Bible is eager to answer.

Of course that’s not the only thing the Bible does. Next week we’re going to use a different part of who we are to unwrap this same story, our hearts. What does this story *feel* like? These are real people, what was it like for Peter to go through the storm, to see the mighty deeds of Jesus? And what feelings does that stir up in us?

mind - What can we learn?

heart - What did it feel like?

body - Where am I in this story?

And the last Sunday of February, we’re going to bring our bodies into this reading, we’re going to put ourselves into the story and wonder in what ways this is *my* story?

So stay tuned.

For today, let’s recognize that using our minds to understand and experience scripture is a great gift and opportunity. And it is also limited.

Our understanding is never pure. We’re never going to get exactly what the writers had in mind, we’re never going to fully capture the wisdom and meaning of the Bible.

For one, there is just so much distance between now and the time this book came from. The language is different, the culture is different, the scientific understanding is different, the things that people knew, how they thought and wrote and read (those that could read and write)...so much has changed.

And that means that there is just so much that we don’t know. There’s also the noise of two thousand years of tradition talking about the book, bringing more and more layers of culture and politics and interpretation...

To cut through all of that to get the “one true understanding” of Scripture is hard work, for amateurs and professionals alike.

And I'm sure we often get it wrong or miss the point. Half of the stuff I said with great confidence today could be a rabbit trail, totally the wrong direction from where the writers meant to take their readers.

(Perhaps where I interpret the imagery of the Exodus story is really just a description of Jesus going for a walk--there are tons of mountains and water and towns with meaningful names in ancient Israel, so where else is he going to go? Maybe everything sounds to me like Exodus because Exodus is an archetype for every journey, a broad story that sounds like most good stories?)

I'm operating with my best understanding of the moment, and that's the most that even the best scholars are able to do. That's not bad, we do know a whole lot. But there are limits to our knowledge.

Further, our minds come with baggage, for worse and for better.

Asking questions is great, and the Bible has answers, but we only get answers to the questions that we think to ask.

I see the Exodus story in the gospels because someone taught me to see it. I break this down as literature and drama because that's my training, and that's what I do with any story that comes my way. If I had the training and experience of a meteorologist, or a boatmaker, or a forensic anthropologist, then I would bring a completely different set of questions and expectations to this reading, and I might learn a completely different lesson.

And that's okay. One of the things that makes the Bible work is that that expectation is built in. It's not a bug, it's a feature. The Bible is *written* by people with very different training and experiences, its contributors are legal scholars and farmers, royals and laborers, desert people and boat people and city people.

The voice of God in scripture is earthy, it's multi-voiced, it's brought out and protected by the experience of community.

And so we should read it in community, especially as we search for meaning.

I really hope that you don't come to church expecting to hear the preacher explain what a text means. I'll explain to you what I think I know, and I try really hard to make it sound like I know what I'm talking about. And I do hope that you learn things from what I've learned.

But the full truth is beyond me.

When we read the book together, when we all bring our minds together, especially when we seek out diversity in experience and training, that's when we get closest to the truth of the text.

And again, the invitation of the Son of God, through the power of the Spirit of God that also is alive in us, the invitation is to listen and to trust, to choose to take the next step, in or out of the boat, and to allow ourselves to engage with the mystery more fully and wholly.

May God bless the reading of the Word.

