

**10 Pentecost
August 13, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

There are probably as many explanations for the Miracle of Walking on Water as there are preachers in our churches. Some take it at face value and declare that it is an actual “miracle” ... a phenomenon outside of what most people accept as natural laws. As such, this “miracle” becomes one more example of Jesus’ divinity as the son of God.

Others explain it by saying that in the storm and waves the disciples were really a lot closer to land than they thought. That Jesus was actually wading in shallow water, and when Peter jumped out of the boat he happened to jump into a deeper portion of the Sea of Galilee. To some degree this makes sense ... anyone who has been to the beach at low tide knows that there is usually a sandbar about 50 to 75 yards from shore, and with the waves breaking around them people can be seen walking on the sandbar as if they are walking on water. And, between the sandbar and the beach the water is often deeper ... one can easily step off the sandbar into 4 or 5 feet of water. So, maybe that is the explanation.

And then there is the joke that Jesus just knew where the stones were under the water. In West Virginia I traveled some back-country dirt roads that crossed small rivers. Knowing where the ford of the river was ... the shallow crossing point ... was part of the adventure. I have seen some vehicles that misgauged the crossing and got stuck in the deeper mud one side or the other of the ford. Kind of like Peter jumping out of the boat.

I’m not going to try to explain the story. Maybe it was simply a “miracle.” Perhaps it was in shallow water, or Jesus just knew where to walk to get to the boat. As you have heard me say many times ... I’m not so much interested in whether the story really happened, but how do I know this story to be true in my life today. Just because it didn’t happen, doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

Let’s look at the context in which the author of Matthew’s gospel places this story. Jesus had been healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk ... and then he started teaching in parables. After this section on parables in Matthew’s gospel, the author tells us that Jesus returned to his home town of Nazareth where he was met with awe by some, and skepticism by others ... “He did not do many deeds of power there because of their unbelief.”

It was while he was in Nazareth that he got word that his friend and mentor ... the one who had baptized him ... John the Baptist ... had been beheaded by Herod. John had made the mistake of telling truth to power. Herod was having an affair with his brother’s wife, and John the Baptist had called Herod out on his adultery. Herod had John arrested, and then at a birthday

party for Herod his niece ... the daughter of Herod's brother's wife with whom Herod was having an affair ... dance for Herod. He was so pleased that he offered the young woman anything she wanted, and she demanded John the Baptist's head on a platter. Now, I know that is a little graphic and gruesome, but remember, I'm just telling you what is written in the Bible.

I wonder if you or I can imagine what Jesus must have been feeling about his ministry at this particular time? He had brought healing to lots of people ... bringing them from a state of brokenness to wholeness. He had taught an unconventional wisdom and had started meaningful conversations that led to seeing the world differently. But when he had gone to his hometown he had been confronted with those who were skeptical of the man who had grown up in their midst. Nazareth was a relatively small village. Archeologists have discovered one main well that could have served a few hundred people at most. So Jesus would have been known by many, if not all, of the people. They knew his mother and father, his sisters and brothers. I can hear the skeptics saying, "Just who does he think he is?"

I've told this story a number of times, but when I went to seminary I had a beard, I wore my hair down to my shoulders with a leather headband, and I wore Dashikis, jeans and sandals. On my first day of class at seminary I sat between a retired United States Navy Admiral, and a former state judge. I know they were looking at me saying, "What the hell is he doing here?" I know I was thinking, "What the hell am I doing here?" So, I think I have an idea of the ambivalence Jesus might have felt when he confronted by the skeptics in his home town.

Then, while still pondering the response of the doubters Jesus got word of John's beheading. My guess is that the news threw Jesus for a loop. Grief, anger, confusion all mixed with uncertainty. Not only had John been his mentor, but Jesus was following in his footsteps as he confronted the power structures of the Temple and the Roman government. He must have been thinking, "Where is this going to lead?"

So, it was time for Jesus to find a place by himself for some prayer. Jesus got in a boat with his disciples to go "to a deserted place by himself." However, those around his hometown who saw something special in Jesus followed him along the shoreline, and when he got out of the boat and saw the crowds he had "compassion" for them. That is when we heard the story about the Feeding of the Five Thousand. That was last week.

This week's Gospel reading immediately follows the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Jesus finally was able to get off by himself. After everyone had had been fed, he sent the disciples out in the boat, dismissed the crowds, and went up the mountain to pray. And early in the morning, after a night of solitude, soul searching, and prayer Jesus left the mountain to find his disciples. That is when we hear about Jesus walking on water as they were fighting the wind and being battered by the waves.

Many of you know that Caren and I have done a lot of work in conflict transformation within congregations and nonprofits. We started out working with Episcopal churches in the Diocese

of Ohio, but soon were consulting with churches in a number of different denominations. Our training was in a system which looks at the way people interact with each other, especially in times of anxiety. Self-differentiated and emotionally mature persons tend to handle anxiety well, and when there is anxiety throughout a system ... almost always the case when there is conflict ... a non-anxious person can reduce the total anxiety. Most of the time our job was to be a non-anxious presence in the midst of anxiety ... to calm the waters so to speak ... then to find those self-differentiated and emotionally mature persons in the congregational system and coach them in being non-anxious leaders, and finally to give the congregation a direction out of their conflict.

This is where I know the Miracle of Walking on Water to be true in my life ... even if it never happened the way Matthew tells the story. If ever there was a self-differentiated and emotionally mature person ... Jesus was it. But even people like Jesus have experiences where “life happens.” Jesus had received a conflicted response in his hometown, and then he learned that John was killed. He needed time to sort all this out, so he decided to go on retreat. But, remember, his disciples were with him in Nazareth, and they heard the news of John’s death as well, and I imagine that they, too, were anxious. That anxiety shows in their response to the 5,000 they were asked to feed. And that anxiety is symbolized by the wind and the waves while they were in the boat.

Jesus ... the self-differentiated one ... the emotionally mature one ... knew he had to sort things out for himself. He needed to “reboot.” He needed to be in touch with that divine presence of God that was alive in him ... so he went up a mountain to pray.

The disciples, in the meantime, were battered by anxiety ... and the wind and the waves. In the midst of their anxiety they see the non-anxious one ... Jesus ... walking on that which symbolizes the anxiety. Jesus is above the anxiety, not in it. Moreover, impetuous Peter wanted to be just like Jesus ... so much so that it made him even more anxious. Jesus invited Peter to join him on top of the waves, and Peter jumped out of the boat. However, Peter immediately sank into the sea. Why? Because Peter had not yet learned to be self-differentiated ... was not yet emotionally mature. Peter was still looking for something outside himself to save him, rather than to identify that part of him that was divine and nurture it the way Jesus nurture his divinity.

I’m really not sure that any of this makes sense to others, but it does to me. It is not an explanation of Jesus walking on the water. Rather it is about how I know this story to be true in my own life. All too often I find myself in an anxious situation ... and, yes, I do become anxious at times. But I have learned that I do best when I take time to “retreat” ... even if it is for just a moment ... and work at being non-anxious.

Taking seriously what Jesus took seriously is not just about mimicking his actions ... it is about one’s heart and soul. Jesus worked at living in the image of his God. The God that was alive in Jesus is also alive in each of us. When we are surrounded by anxiety from outside sources ... such as the world’s events of this past week ... or, when we live with the anxiety that our own choices have led to ... the only real way out is to find a source of peace within. Jesus found that

peace by accessing his relationship with the divine power of God. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then we will do the same.

I cannot change the way world leaders decide to trade bellicose threats at each other, but I can control my response to them, and my response to the anxiety in those around me. I know, that in spite of all my faults, I am a beloved child of God ... made in the image of the divine ... and that the divine presence of God that was available to Jesus is also available to me ... IF ... and this is a big IF ... IF I am willing to work at it. Sometimes it only take a few moments ... sometimes it may takes days or weeks. In the end I may not walk on water, but at least I will be closer to being a non-anxious presence in the midst of the wind and the waves of anxiety around me. And I will be closer to living in the image of God in which I was made.

This is as true for you as it is for me ... and as it was for Jesus.

Amen.