

Sermon: The Message Behind the Miracle

8/9/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Today is finally over,” Jesus sighed to himself. He had sailed with the disciples that morning looking for a deserted place, where he could mourn the death of his close friend and relative John the Baptist. But as we heard last week, word of his upcoming arrival had reached nearby villages, leading a crowd of roughly five thousand men, not to mention women and children, to come and greet him as he came ashore. Out of compassion, Jesus spent the day healing the sick, before taking five loaves and two fish, blessing and breaking them, and having the disciples give them to the crowd. The miracle he performed that day not only filled the stomachs of everyone present, it revealed to the disciples that God can take and transform even a little into more than enough. Finally, the day had come to a close, so Jesus dismissed the crowd after telling his disciples to go on and sail ahead of him. His time for peace and quiet had at long last arrived.

As Jesus prayed on a nearby mountain, his disciples were busy sailing across the Sea of Galilee. Like Jesus, I imagine they were hoping for some calm and relaxation after such a long day. About halfway across, however, they found themselves amidst a raging storm. Some of the disciples, like Peter, having once earned their living fishing on these waters, knew just how dangerous such strong winds could be, so they likely picked up the oars and began to row. Stroke after stroke, they fought against the wind and the waves, desperate to put their feet on solid ground once more. But no matter how hard they rowed, the shore always remained beyond their reach. Slowly, somewhere between 3 and 6 am the next morning, the sun began to rise and out of the shadows and flashes of lighting someone or something could be seen walking towards them.

Terrified, the disciples cried out, “It is a ghost!” To which Jesus immediately replied, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

That day, Jesus set out and met the disciples where they were. He knew that Jewish culture considered the sea to be a place of demons and diabolical monsters, like those that awaken us from our dreams, so he went out to them amidst the storm and sought to calm their nerves. Not just by telling them to take heart and not be afraid, but by reminding them of who he is. “It is I,” he said, echoing the divine name that God gave to Moses so long ago, “I AM WHO I AM.” “I AM,” Jesus tells them, “I am the Son of God, I am the one whom you already witnessed calm a storm, I am the one whom you just witnessed feed the five thousand, I am the one in whom all things are possible. There is no need to be afraid, for I am here and I will always be with you.”

The entire experience was a lot to take in, especially for Peter. “Lord, if it is you,” he declared, “command me to come to you on the water.” He longed to take part in the miracle he was witnessing, to experience the truth that Jesus was proclaiming, and for whatever reason Jesus told him to come. So Peter got out of the boat and started walking, confident at first, until he realized that the wind was still gusting and became afraid. Only then, like his name, *petros*, which means rock, did he begin to sink.

There are times when this passage has been used as a proof-text for faith. We hear Jesus say to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt,” and take it as evidence that the only thing standing between us and walking on water is a little more faith. Except, as we hear elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel, that even faith the size of a mustard seed can move a mountain and what Peter doubted was not whether he could walk on water, but whether Jesus is the Son of God. After all, it is God, the great “I AM,” who made the wind and the waves and the water. God can

make the sea solid enough to walk on if God so chooses. “Given all that you have witnessed,” we hear Jesus ask Peter, “Why do you still doubt who I am?” Why do you doubt that I am? As Jesus helped Peter back into the boat, the wind ceased, adding yet another proof of who he is. In response, Peter and the rest of the disciples began worshiping him, professing for the first time, “Truly, you are the Son of God.”

Why do you still doubt? For some of us, the very thought of a miracle is hard to believe. We can readily accept that Jesus told some good stories and taught us a better way to live, but miracles like feeding the five thousand and walking on water are one step too far. A few years ago, I was watching one of my favorite television shows, Mythbusters. In the episode, they seek to replicate a viral video in which a man runs from the shore onto a lake, making it about 20 feet on top of the water before finally going under. Adam and Jamie, in typical Mythbusters fashion, try to do it themselves, bring in an Olympic sprinter to see if he can reproduce the feat, and finally build and strap their own inventions onto a trained acrobat and gymnast. No matter what they did, they dropped like a rock, because, as we later learn, the man in the viral video did not walk on water, he was running on a transparent bridge hiding just under the water’s surface.

Yes, some of us will always find miracle stories a bit hard to believe, and I would be lying if I told you that I have never wondered how or if Jesus did them. Perhaps, Jesus blessing the loaves and fish inspired the crowd to share what food they had with each other and the story of Jesus walking on water was never supposed to be taken so literally. Whatever the answer, I am sure of one thing. Jesus was not walking on a transparent bridge. He was not trying to trick the disciples into seeing something miraculous and believing that he is the Son of God. At least one miracle happened that day. Jesus may have walked on water. The disciples surely came to believe that he is the Son of God.

We all stand in need of a miracle. We all have times when we need Jesus to come and meet us where we are. There are times when we all experience doubt and feel like we are sinking and lost amidst a storm, and need our Lord and Savior to remind us that he is God's Son, that he is "I AM." Some scholars believe that this is the very reason why we read today's Gospel lesson. At the end of the first century, when Matthew's Gospel was written, those within the church were beginning to doubt. You see, Jesus had promised them that he would be with them always, to the end of the age, but he still left them. For years, they had waited for his return, and waited, and waited. They had waited so long and endured such so much that they were beginning to feel alone, lost at sea amidst a storm. They needed to be reminded to take heart and not be afraid, that Jesus is their Lord and Savior, and that God has not and never will abandon them.

This message rings just as true today as it did back then. Let us take heart, not be afraid, have faith that the storms in our lives will one day pass, and trust that miracles do indeed happen. Miracles, like the one we just heard, which will lead us to all confidently proclaim, "Truly, you are the Son of God." Amen.