**WATER WIMPS**

August 13, 2017

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

10th Sunday of Pentecost

19th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

S

omewhere I read about a family that decided to vacation in Colorado. They flew to Denver and rented a car. While there, they visited the Royal Gorge Bridge. This bridge is a little scary to drive across. It stands more than 1,000 feet above the Arkansas River.

Walking out onto the bridge, the dad noticed it swaying in the wind. Then a car went past them, and the wood-plank roadway moved beneath their feet. “I don’t think I want to drive the car across this bridge,” said the father nervously.

“What are you worried about, Dad?” his teen-aged daughter replied. “This car is a rental.”

Well, maybe it was a rental, but he was apprehensive, nonetheless.

Some of us can sympathize with that Dad. We get a little nervous about the thought of driving on a rickety bridge suspended 1,000 feet in the air for the truth is that twenty-five feet in the air would make us nervous.

If you have ever been afraid, you can sympathize with poor Simon Peter. Impetuously he had told Jesus that he wanted to imitate the Master and walk to him on the water. But then he looked down at the waves and became suddenly fearful and began to sink. We read the part of his beginning to drown and we think, “What a water wimp!”

You know the story well. Jesus has just fed 5,000 hungry men and an untold number of women and children. He told his disciples to get into a boat and go on ahead of him to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowd. In John’s gospel, we read that he did this because the people were ready to proclaim him king after he had performed this amazing miracle of feeding so many hungry folks.

After he dismissed the crowd, Jesus ascended a mountainside by himself to pray. Meanwhile the boat containing the disciples was already a considerable distance from land. Suddenly a storm erupted and the boat was being buffeted by the wind and the waves. The disciples were growing fearful.

If you have been to the Sea of Galilee you may have examined its geography and learned about the Horns of Hattin.[[1]](#footnote-1) These two curved pieces of rock sit high above the plain on the north end of the Sea, very near the location of the feeding of the 5,000 and when wind from the west, coming from the Mediterranean blows toward the East, they funnel the air into a spiral that acts like an egg beater that can turn the Sea of Galilee from a calm body of water to a violet one in a mere few minutes.

Then, shortly before dawn, the disciples saw something that terrified them. Out on the water they saw something coming toward them. They quickly concluded that it was a ghost. It is not. It was Jesus walking toward them on the lake. Jesus says to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied bravely, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

And Jesus simply said, “Come.”

At this Peter got out of the boat, walked on the water toward Jesus. But then the thinking part of his mind overtook the kinetic and responsive part and then the processing of it brought forth the conclusion that this wasn’t a great idea. The Sea of Galilee is cold and deep and he had no life-preserver. And while managing these emerging thoughts and fears he began to sink. This burly out-spoken fisherman was afraid of drowning. He’s a fisherman, for crying out loud! Doesn’t he know how to swim? But he screamed it, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” the Master said, “why did you doubt?” And when the two of them climbed into the boat, the wind ceased and the disciples, including Simon Peter begin to worship Jesus, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

It is one of the best-known stories in the New Testament. It’s a story that has captured the imagination and the ridicule of people throughout the ages. Why the ridicule? Because it is a miracle.

I have been intrigued by miracles. Aren't you? My mind is captivated by the miracles of commonplace. It came home sincerely when I watched each of my children being born. There was no doubt in mind that this creation of life was a miraculous. I have a similar, although less intense feelings when I see flowers open and nature come alive in the spring and then go to bed in the fall. These are marvels which convict me of the order and planning of a divine spirit who intended the earth to come into being and has a purpose even for me.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But there are those other miracles, those descriptions of things in the Bible that do not square with our understanding of physics, that defy all known laws of science and have us scratching our heads. What do we do with them? How we struggle with the integrity of the writers and the veracity of the Biblical text in recounting the events.

Certainly, that is the case with this account of Jesus walking on the sea and then calming it. There are many miraculous occurrences around water in the Bible. We wonder how the sea was stopped in Exodus where the scriptures describe the Israelites fleeing from Egypt. We see in our memories, Charleton Heston portraying Moses, the rod held above his head as the waters parted and the Israelites poured onto that dry strip of earth, the blue-green water shooting up like flames on either side until the Egyptians chased after them.

We wonder about story of Jonah or Jesus paying the tax. Have you read that in Matthew 18?

*After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the tax? "Yes, he does," he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes - from their own sons or from others? "From others," Peter answered. "Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."*

After all the continual rearranging of the deck chairs in Albany or D.C. do you not have a sense that replication of this miracle of our Lord would come in real handy about now. We could say to Senators Schumer, Hatch, and Johnson, “We’re going to send the congregation down to the canal on a fishing expedition this afternoon, and there they are going to reel in some carp and find inside, the tax dollars you argue about and for which you are seeking reform.

Humorist Mark Twain referred to it when he told of a time he was in the Holy Land with his wife. They spent one night at a resort on the Sea of Galilee. It was particularly beautiful--a full moon over the sea made for an especially romantic setting.

So, the Twains decided that they wanted to go on a moonlit ride on the lake. Twain approached one of the local fishermen and asked him how much he would charge to take them out in a boat.

The man looked at Twain--observed his white suit, hat, shirt, and shoes--and supposed him to be wealthy. “For you--my friend--twenty-five dollars!” the fisherman replied.

This was back when twenty-five dollars was a lot of money. Twain knew it was certainly too much for a boat ride. He turned to walk away. “I always wondered,” he grumbled, “why Jesus walked. Now I know!”[[3]](#footnote-3)

I wonder if this story of Jesus walking on the water--and Peter’s failed attempt to follow him – appeals to us because we know what it is to begin a daunting venture and then draw back from our plans. Fear is, of course, a universal emotion. Everybody is afraid of something.

We are born with two fears when we come into the world according to psychologists--fear of loud noises and fear of falling. It does not take us long, however, to accumulate many other fears - fear of the dark, fear of lightning and thunder, fear of dogs, fear of other people. For many this list grows over a lifetime--fear of heights, of closed-in spaces, fear of trains or planes, and others.

**Fear is a universal emotion and it sets boundaries for us.** Fear permits even pleasant things to become hostile to our senses. Fear can paralyze us and we can be overwhelmed over the fear of losing our job, our marriage, our health, and our life. Matthew tells us that the disciples were terrified.  Jesus said to them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Louis Pasteur, a founder of the science of microbiology, was morbidly afraid of germs. Well, duh, Pasteur was the chap who first introduced much of the world to the idea of germs in the first place. Most of us learned about Pasteur as the creator of pasteurization, through which harmful bacteria are removed from milk.

Pasteur discovered that these tiny microbes, bacteria, exist almost everywhere and then realizing they could cause a fatal reaction, Pasteur became obsessed with his own personal cleanliness. He spent hours compulsively washing and rewashing his hands--he even washed the bar of soap! He refused to shake hands. If someone grabbed his hand to shake it, he immediately rushed to the nearest washroom to wash. He was famous for examining his food before he ate it and looked for any sign of contamination. He examined dishes and silverware for suspicious signs they hadn’t been properly washed.

His obsession affected his concern for his son, Jean‑Baptiste. Jean‑Baptiste served in the French army during the Franco‑Prussian War.  He was stationed in an army hospital far away from the front lines. You would think Pasteur would be relieved that his son was not involved in the fighting but this was little comfort to Pasteur for he knew that hospitals can be especially infested with germs. It’s interesting how the world has changed to where we are beginning to be concerned again about patients being infected with germs, even super-germs, in our hospitals today.

Pasteur was so obsessed with germ-infected hospitals that he wrote to his son’s commanding officer requesting that Jean‑Baptiste be sent to the front lines of the fighting and away from the contagion in the hospital. “In Pasteur’s mind, flying bullets on the frontline were safer than all those germ‑ridden sick and wounded men. Despite his father’s concerns, [by the way] Jean‑Baptiste survived the war and lived to be 56 years old, a long life for that era.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Here’s what we need to see: Jesus doesn’t want us to be prisoners to fear.** Louis Pasteur had good reason to be afraid, but think how much joy was taken out of his life by his constant obsession with germs. Jesus doesn’t want fear to rob us of our joy, or our effectiveness as his followers. He doesn’t want to see us shrink back from responsibilities to Rochester and our family and ourselves because of fear.

Note what he said to his terrified disciples when they see him walking toward them that night on the lake. Jesus says to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” This was but one of many times that people in the Bible are told to not fear. Sometimes a bit of courage will get us through the day and sometimes it is what we need to focus on the important, otherwise, we can become immobilized. There we are watching the news and we become petrified with all the sandbox bullying and yelling of world leaders. We see those who on the outside seem to exhibit a sense of superiority, but whose actions reveal much fear in Charlottesville, Virginia. We learn about an opioid epidemic across our land, and become afraid that it will invade our community. And so, we become prisoners to fear. Jesus seems to invite the disciples to greater trust in courage to make the world more like God intended.

It takes courage to stand for what we know is right. Maybe you have been inspired as I have been by Malala. A few years ago, at age 11, this girl, Malala began blogging for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). She wanted to let the world know about life in Pakistan under the Taliban. In 2009 the Taliban issued an edict that banned education for all girls. This was offensive to Malala, and the edict became a featured target of her blog.

And so, in October 2012, misguided Taliban thugs, fearful that women being educated might thwart their abuse and power, boarded a school bus on which young Malala was riding and shot her in the head at point-blank range.

The bullet should have killed her, but miraculously she survived and then became even more determined to stand firm in her fight to ensure that girls everywhere receive an education. Malala has been recognized around the world for her courage, including a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize and an opportunity to address the United Nations on her sixteenth birthday about the importance of education.

By the way, Malala forgave her attackers, which is what she says, “real Islam” teaches.[[5]](#footnote-5) That’s courage. We see it in people young and old and we admire it at any age.

There is delightful anecdote about a famous evangelist named Peter Cartwright. One day the President of the United States, Andrew Jackson--came to Cartwright’s church. The elders of the church warned Preacher Cartwright not to offend the President. You see, at that time, the President could seriously influence a religious denomination--not that this could happen today. Anyway, the elders of the church had no desire to have President Jackson angry at them. So, they insisted that Cartwright must not offend the President.

They were wasting their time. When Cartwright got up to speak, the first words out of his mouth were these: “I understand that President Andrew Jackson is here this morning. I have been requested to be very guarded in my remarks. Let me say this: Andrew Jackson will go to hell if doesn’t repent of his sin!”

The entire congregation gasped in shock. This was no way to talk about the President of the United States [though it is kind of refreshing].

After the service, Andrew Jackson met the preacher at the door--looked him in the eye and said, “Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, we could change the world!”[[6]](#footnote-6) Jackson evidently appreciated meeting a person of conviction and courage.

**If Andrew Jackson could conquer the world with people like Peter Cartwright, think what Jesus could do with followers who had conviction and courage for the principles that Jesus taught.** Being a follower of Jesus isn’t for wimps. It’s for those who are willing to do whatever is right to live out Christ’s kingdom.

For many years I would walk past or into the Robert Speer library on the campus of Princeton Seminary. There was a small plaque that announced that it was dedicated to Robert Speer. I didn’t know who he was, but one day while in that library, I went to the card catalogue to see if there were any books there by Robert Speer and I found one entitled, *The Principles of Jesus*. I took it to a study carrel and began to read through it. At one point, on a piece of notepaper, I copied down what Speer said were the four absolutes from the teachings of Jesus Christ and I kept that in a three-ring binder for years. This week it was rediscovered. Robert E. Speer said that the four absolutes form the teachings of Jesus were:

1. Absolute Honesty
2. Absolute Purity
3. Absolute unselfishness
4. Absolute Love

Speer’s work had an impact on The Oxford Group and through them the early developers of Alcoholics Anonymous. The book was over-flowing with references to Bible passages so that it would probably be a good study-guide.

How might our world be different if we were to have the courage to practice those principles?

It is devotion to what he had been teaching that Jesus needed from Simon Peter. Throughout the Gospels, Simon Peter is more a reed than a rock. Throughout the Gospels he is almost a comical figure in his eagerness and impetuosity. He wants to walk on water, but at the first sign of trouble, he gives in to fear and begins to sink. On the night Christ was betrayed Peter told the Master that even if all the rest of the disciples forsake him, he will never forsake him--and that same night Peter denied three times that he ever knew Jesus.

Christ needed more out of Simon Peter than that--just as he needs more than that from us.

Fortunately, after Pentecost, Jesus got more than that out of Simon Peter. Peter became a rock for the early church. He and St. Paul became the acknowledged leaders of the early Christian movement. Tradition has it that Simon Peter, like his Lord and Master, died from crucifixion, except that Peter was crucified upside down because he didn’t feel worthy to be crucified in the same way as Christ.

Who are the persons in this church who are ready like Simon Peter to take their commitment to another level and give their all to the service of his kingdom?

Listen to these words of philosopher and author Dallas Willard: “The leading assumption in America today . . . is that you can be a Christian without being a disciple. That, of course, is false.”

John lived in Minnesota and all through his adolescent years he had heard that his father, grandfather and great‑grandfather had all walked on water on their 21st birthdays. So, on his 21st birthday, John and his good friend Steve headed out to the lake. “If they did it, I can too!” he insisted.

When John and Steve arrived at the lake, they took out the old row boat that they had used for years for fishing. It has been improved with a small Johnson outboard. When they got to the middle of the lake, John stepped off the side of the boat . . . and nearly drowned. Furious and somewhat shamed, he and Steve headed for home.

When John arrived home, he asked his grandmother for an explanation. “Grandma, why could I not walk on water on my 21st birthday like my father, and his father, and his father before him?”

The feeble old Minnesota grandmother took John by the hands, looked into his eyes and said, “That’s because your father, grandfather, and great‑grandfather were born in January . . . you were born in August, dear.”

I guess if it had been January and the Sea of Galilee had somehow frozen over, anyone could have walked on it. This wasn’t Minnesota and it wasn’t January. Yet Jesus walked on the water and his disciples were afraid. Jesus tried to calm them: “Take courage!” he said. “It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

And, of course, it is Simon Peter who speaks up: “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.” You’ve got to appreciate Peter’s can-do spirit.

“Come,” Jesus said.

We will have our own storms that will unsettle us:

Greed

Pride

Boastfulness

Lack of knowledge

Being alone

My fellow water wimps, we may not have to walk on water, but we may be called upon to have daring, audacity and resolve to face the world’s and our own storms, and to make a difference in the world, and to live out the principles of Jesus, we will need the will to step out of the boat.

**ADDENDUMS**

**Some Common Fears**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Fear of the dark | Fear of evil | Fear of punishment |
| Fear of God (negative) | Fear of people | Fear of animals |
| Fear of rejection | Fear of heights | Fear of water |
| Fear of failure | Fear of closed spaces | Fear of disease |
| Fear of spiders or insects | Fear of being alone | Fear of fear |

**Top 12 Fears Scientific Name**

1) Speaking before a group (40%) Topophobia

2) Heights (30%) Acrophobia

3) Insects and bugs (20%) Entomophobia

4) Financial problems (20%) Atephobia 5

) Deep Water (20%) Bathophobia

 6) Disease (20%) Phathophobia

7) Death (20%) Thanatophobia

8) Flying (20%) Aerophobia 9

) Loneliness (15%) Monophobia

10) Dogs (10%) Cynophobia

11) Driving/riding in a car (10%) Ochophobia

12) Dark (10%) Nyctophobia[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horns\_of\_Hattin [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From *No Fool on the Pool*, a sermon preached at Christ Presbyterian Church, August 8, 1993 in Canton, Ohio on the 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time by Bruce Boak. The text for that message was Matthew 14:13-21 and Romans 10:5-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dr. Jerry Tankersley, http://www.lagunapreschurch.org/cgi‑bin/sermons/write\_htm.cgi?102231246 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader Plunges into Great Lives*(San Diego: Portable Press, 2003), p. 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The New International Lesson Annual: September 2014 – August 2015*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.forgottenword.org/cartwright-jackson.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Charles J. Givens, *Super-Self* (Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)