

“Don’t Look Down”

I don’t have cable.

I don’t say this to claim any cultural superiority. After all, I do have a TV and a subscription to Netflix. And frankly, through Netflix I’ve watched too many old episodes of “Family Ties” to feel comfortable standing on any moral high ground. Nonetheless, when I do come into contact with a TV with cable I am amazed. The sheer number of channels. The countless shows that follow “real housewives.” Entire networks devoted to a single sport. Every time I go to the gym I leave ready to search online for whatever recipe Rachael Ray was making as I worked the treadmill.

Lately, when I’ve wanted a distraction from hearing about the debt ceiling crisis, I’ve been paying more attention to adventure shows. Network TV has “The Amazing Race,” but the cable adventure shows are extreme. Like...the weirdest foods in the world. The guy who tries to survive in a jungle with only the knife in his pocket. Ghost hunters who traipse around Irish castles in order to communicate with the dead. Real life just can’t compare. Even this morning’s scripture passage—which is about as action-packed as the New Testament gets—can feel a little underwhelming.

It begins right where we left off last week. We’re in the wake of the feeding of the five thousand. And as Tristan pointed out last Sunday, Jesus has long needed a break. This week, he finally gets one. He begins by dismissing the crowd of five thousand plus and makes the disciples get into a boat to head to the other side of the lake. He stays behind for some solitary prayer on the mountain. When evening comes, Jesus is still at prayer but the disciples have encountered some rough waters. Their boat, which can’t be very big, is being tossed to and fro in the waves. Add to that, the disciples are trying to row against the wind—an exhausting and frustrating process—and yet for all of their sweat land is still too far away. They endure a restless night of rowing, until finally, early in the morning, an apparition appears on the rough water. Spooooky!

That’s what the disciples think, anyway. Their sleep-deprived minds conclude that the figure in front of them, framed by the rising sun, is a ghost, so of course they are terrified. But Jesus is quick to reassure them. It’s him: there’s no need to be afraid! “Take heart, he says, “it is I!”

This is where Peter jumps into the narrative. He has in mind a test, a way to make sure that the man they see in front of them is actually Jesus. He asks Jesus to command him to come to him on the water. Surely if Jesus can walk on water, then so can Peter! Jesus accepts this invitation (really, it seems more like a challenge) and says—come. Come. That’s all that Peter needs: an invitation. He steps gingerly out of the boat, as it continues to pitch and sway, while the disciples gape at the scene with their mouths wide open. And he begins to walk on the water. Matthew doesn’t explain how this

happens—as with the loaves and the fish—the “how” of the miracle doesn’t seem to be as important as the “why.” Peter walks on water—somehow he’s doing it. For this scene, I imagine Peter as a toddler learning how to walk, staggering forward, arms out for balance, his whole body tilted towards the person with the outstretched arms, who says: You can do it, come here, come to me! But suddenly, Peter notices the wind. It has been there all along, of course, but maybe Peter lets down his guard, or remembers that he’s standing...on a lake. Matthew says he becomes frightened, and begins to sink.

Faith is a risk.

As he sinks, Peter cries out: “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus closes the gap between them and Peter is lifted up out of the dark water. When they reach the boat again, Jesus says to Peter: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Depending on how you read it, Jesus could be chastising Peter, chiding him affectionately or simply asking a straightforward question. Peter doesn’t answer, though, and when they climb aboard the boat again, the wind (almost magically) ceases. The disciples now have all of the information they need to make a strong positive identification. The man who walks on water *is* Jesus, the Son of God.

It seems hard to believe that these are the same disciples, the same ones who mistook Jesus for a ghost—the disciples who watched from the relative safety of a boat while Peter risked his life. Now they declare that Jesus isn’t just Jesus, their friend and rabbi. Jesus is the Son of God, the God of their ancestors, the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who subdued the primordial waters in Genesis 1. You see, the Bible has a slightly different sense of geography than we do. In the biblical imagination, mountains are places of divine contact.¹ After all, it was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the Ten Commandments; it was a mountain where Jesus prayed just before he met Peter on the lake. In contrast, lakes and seas are often places of chaos and unpredictability. In other words, places where God isn’t supposed to be. And yet Peter does meet God in the waters, and never mistakes him for someone else again.

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Almost every time I preach I have the experience of feeling as if the scripture I’m wrestling with is speaking to me, just as I try to help it speak to you. So, as I tell this story, it’s not much of a leap for me, at least, to imagine myself as one of the disciples on the quaking boat or even Peter himself, taking baby steps forward one moment and panicking the next. My time as a Transition-into-Ministry Associate Minister is almost over. I can hardly believe it. The time has gone so quickly, and yet, when I try to reach back into my memory to summon the beginning—the summer of 2009—I draw a blank. I only remember how I felt: scared out of my mind. Everything felt so awkward at the beginning: wearing the robe, seeing The Reverend in front of my name, leading worship, and even more than those things—the amazing intimacies of this role. The

¹ Jae Won Lee, “Commentary on Matthew 14: 22-33,” *Feasting on the Word Year A Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 333.

time I've spent with you in hospital rooms and board meetings, coffeeshops and worship spaces. I've preached to you and prayed with you. I have buried some of your friends and family members, baptized some of your children and grandchildren, and married some of you, too. Even though ministry can feel like life lived in high definition—as if every pore on my face is visible—this profound intimacy is a unique gift of this calling, and I thank you being part of that gift. I hope you can let go of every silly, thoughtless or unhelpful thing I've said, and forgive those times when I fell short of living into the fullness of my role.

Ministry, I am too well aware, is a risk too, and now, at the end of my time here, I have that old familiar feeling. I'm in the boat again, this time in the search process, looking for the next place to do ministry. I know the feeling: I'm waiting to be called to step out of the boat.

Maybe you're not in the boat, but in the deep water.

One of the messages I take from this text is that the life of faith, much like life itself, takes place in the context of chaos and uncertainty. Maybe every generation feels as if it lives in uncertain times, but the events of the past few weeks have not been comforting. Jesus may have railed against the empire of his day, but living in our declining empire is no treat. The interests of the poor and oppressed in our nation are being ground up in the moneyed machinery of our political process while the middle classes wither away, losing their dreams along with their 401(k)s. It's too easy in these times to hunker down, to build security systems around what we have left instead of getting out of the boat and working for the common good.

For God doesn't intend for anyone to slip under the waves, to drown in fear or under the great weight of our own dysfunction. Jesus wants everyone to walk on water. He doesn't jealously guard miracles or hoard blessings. He invites us to come on in, because the water is fine! Instead of staying right where we are, if we get out of the boat, a whole lifetime of growing trust in God is the adventure that we have to look forward to.

And for those times when we would rather dwell in shallow water, Jesus gives us a chance to dare to see if we can live by faith and faith alone. Because our risk-taking should not be confined to managing investments or traveling to exotic places on spring break or watching someone eat a beetle on TV. We too often quench our thirst for adventure in pre-packaged experiences that leave us safe, but not satisfied. What we settle for is adrenaline, when what we really desire is joy, love, peace, fulfillment, beauty, purpose, LIFE. This small story about walking on water suggests that to live life with God is an adventure—exciting and tumultuous—with the twistiest of turns and the biggest dips and the highest heights. To live life with God is to be called out of ourselves—to align our actions with God's actions in the world—and at the same time, to be nobody but ourselves. To live life with God is to not know what's going to happen next—and instead of assuming the world is going to pieces—to trust instead that God isn't done with us yet. Is all this worth getting out of the boat for? Dear God: I hope so!

Faith is a risk. Nothing in the Bible says otherwise. Nothing in my experience, and probably yours, says any different. So, why don't we do this together? Let's step out of the boat—and as we do, let me say “thank you” one more time, and also, “thanks be to God.” Amen.