

### ***Walking on Water***

In the name of him who rules over the all earth, sky, and sea, dear friends in Christ: I've not been there, but I've been told by people who have that there is a place on the Sea of Galilee where you can have a picture taken of you walking on the water. No, really. It's a gimmicky tourist thing. It seems they've got a long plank of some transparent acrylic material supported by piers just below the surface of the lake. You step out onto it and they snap your picture with the shore in the distant background. Sure enough, it looks like you're standing on the water. And then, no doubt, they charge you a ridiculous sum of money so that you can go home and impress your family and friends with your photo that's even more ridiculous than the price you paid for it. I don't know. To me that sort of thing trivializes the biblical account we have before us today.

There's another way to trivialize this account that I see all too often. It's committed by pastors who preach on this text and the main point they derive from it and hammer home to their hearers is that the miracle of walking on water proves that Jesus is God. After all, that's what it says at the end: "Those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'." See? There you go. That must be what it's all about. ... Um, no.

Now, don't get me wrong: it is a valid point to be made. It's true. Jesus is God. And displays of his divine power prove it. But it makes for an awfully short and shallow sermon. And if that's all the miracles of Jesus are about, it appears he thought we needed a whole heap of convincing because he performed so many of them. So every time a miracle text comes up, you get the same sermon all over again.

But it's not that simple. The miracles of Jesus are also signs that point to something greater. When Jesus cleanses a leper of that terrible disease, for example, it points to how he cleanses all of us from the far more deadly leprosy of sin. When Jesus opens the eyes of a blind person it points to how he opens the eyes of the spiritually blind so that they can see and discern the truth. Something like that is going on with all of his miracles.

We saw it last week in the feeding of the 5000. Jesus takes five loaves and two fish, blesses them, divides them among his disciples, and they distribute them among the hungry crowd. Everyone eats their fill. And twelve baskets of leftovers are returned to Jesus. Sure, on the surface it proves that Jesus is God and that he cares about the needs of hungry people. But it's much more than that. It's an illustration of the Church. It pictures how Jesus will place in the hands of his disciples God's Word and Sacraments, how with these means of grace which appear so small and insignificant his disciples will feed multitudes with the Bread of Life, and how they will gather the faithful redeemed and bring them to Jesus with whom they will live forever.

Now, it happens that this week's text picks up right where last week's left off. As night begins to fall, Jesus orders his disciples to get back into the boat that they used to get out to this remote beach on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. They came here because they had hoped to take a short vacation away from the crowds, but things didn't work out that way. The crowds followed them here. And it's here that Jesus fed them with the miraculously multiplied loaves of bread. Now Jesus sends his disciples back to Capernaum while he remains behind to dismiss the crowd, which he does. Then alone he ascends a nearby mountain to pray.

Meanwhile the disciples are having a tough go of it. The wind and waves are against them. They are straining at the oars making headway very slowly. We can well imagine them soaked to the skin with the spray of the breaking waves, cold, tired, their hands blistered and raw from pulling at the wet oars. They're miserable, yearning for this long night to be over. During what Matthew calls "the fourth watch of the night", which is between 3:00 and 6:00 am, the disciples are terrified when they see a human form walking toward them on the churning surface of the lake. They know a physical body can't do that. They conclude therefore that it must be a spirit, a ghostly apparition of some kind. They cry out in fear. Jesus immediately calms them, "Courage, lads, It's me. Don't be afraid."

Well, that's his voice, all right. And we have seen him do some remarkable things. Still, there's some apprehension. It's Peter who responds. (For some reason it always seems to be Peter.) "Lord, if it is you, order me to come to you on the water."

Full stop. Why not, "If it's you, Jesus, come closer so we can see you better"? I mean, if you're not reasonably sure about who it is, who's going to step out of the boat? And just because *he* can walk on water doesn't mean I can. When you think about it, It's really a weird request. But Jesus allows it. "Come on, then." Peter does. And things go okay for a bit. But as soon as Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus to focus on the wind and waves, he starts to go under. Sinking down he cries, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus takes hold of his arm and lifts him back to the surface. He brings him back to the boat. And as soon as they both get in, the wind stops blowing. It will be easy rowing from here on out. All in the boat are justifiably amazed at what they have just witnessed. They worship Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

That's the story. The question is, what does it mean? "Jesus is God." Yeah, we know that already. What else does it mean? Well, we saw that the feeding of the 5000 is an illustration of the Church. Let's go with the idea that this is another picture of the Church taken from a different angle. There is a long biblical tradition dating back to the time of a guy named Noah that pictures the Church as a boat. It's the safe place to be in the raging sea of this world. Outside the boat you drown. The deep water is death. This image is highlighted by three things. First is the direction the disciples are traveling. They're going from the desolate wilderness side of the lake to the western shore, to the Promised Land. That's where we're all headed. Second is that it's night, the long dark night of this age. We can't see the far shore. We can't even see what lays a short way ahead. And third is the weather. Like everything else in the world it's against us. Life in this age isn't easy. We make our way slowly, facing problems, hardships, and persecutions.

And where's Jesus? He's said good bye to this world. Its people don't see him anymore. He's ascended. And there he intercedes for his Church at the Father's right hand. What did you think Jesus was praying about? He prays for what concerns him the most. He prays for his people.

And here's the neat thing: even though Jesus has ascended and is interceding for us, he's also with his Church. He comes to us in the long, cold, night of this age. We hear his voice in his Word and Sacraments. He calms our fears. And death is no threat to him. By his death for sin and his resurrection he defeated death. It has no power over him. Death literally lies dead at his feet. He treads upon it with impunity. And because he defeated death, it's no threat to us either – as long as we keep our focus on and our trust in him.

We know that in time the long, dark night of this age will come to an end. The Day of the Lord will dawn, the light that never ends. When it does, the Ark of the Church will reach the far

shore and the faithful will disembark into the eternal Promised Land. Until then we row onward against the wind and waves. And from time to time as we travel Jesus calls one or more of us out of the boat to join him walking on the surface of death. It can be a little scary, but it need not be; not with Jesus there. If and when your turn comes to make that walk on the water keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Don't look at the wind and waves. But if you do allow yourself to become distracted and feel yourself beginning to sink, you have only to cry out to him, "Lord, save me!" And he will. He will do so immediately.

And eventually those who are in the boat together with those who made that walk on the water will all reach the same destination. The wind will cease. The Day will dawn. And all of us together will worship him, our Savior, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God!" In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***