

I have a question about our gospel lesson today: Why did Peter get out of the boat?

Undoubtedly you've heard a sermon on this lesson urging YOU to follow Peter's example. "Get out of the boat," you've been told. "Have faith. Just don't take your eyes off Jesus or you'll sink like Peter did. Walking on water requires FAITH."

This is a perfectly good interpretation of our gospel lesson. Peter asked and Jesus gave him permission to come to him on the water. And all was well—miraculous, even—until Peter became afraid of the storm. I reserve the right to preach such a sermon IN THE FUTURE. Just not today.

TODAY I wonder, "Why did Peter get out of the boat?" God didn't give him a water-walking mission. Jesus didn't call Peter to come to him on the water. Quite the contrary. Jesus told the disciples to get in the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side of the lake. Jesus wanted to be alone to pray. Actually, the text says that Jesus "made the disciples get into the boat." Maybe Jesus' need for alone prayer time made him bend their free will a little bit.

So, this is how the disciples came to be in a boat when a storm arose. They were not afraid of the storm, though. Not this time. Remember the last time they were in a boat, THAT time with Jesus, when a storm arose? They were afraid and they woke Jesus and told him to "do something." Then when he calmed the storm and saved them, they marveled that even the wind and sea obeyed him. This time, though, what terrified them was not the storm, but someone (possibly a ghost) approaching them, walking on the water.

I don't know about you, but I've seen enough horror movies to know that someone walking at us on the water during a storm taps into our deep fears.

John's gospel, which also reports this incident, says (6:19) the disciples even recognized that the person walking on the water was Jesus. And yet they were still terrified because they thought he was a ghost. Who WAS this person Jesus? And what did he want of them?



Yongsung Kim, The Hand of God, contemporary oil painting, image courtesy of Foundation Arts

We like God to be our friend, our helper, and to be on our side—but at a distance. When we recognize that God is coming our way, coming close, and might want something of us personally, now THAT is a terrifying prospect.

The disciples apparently thought so. They weren't stupid people. They were people like you and me, doing their best to be who God wanted them to be. They were in the boat, as instructed, going where they had been told. They had even learned to not fear a raging storm. And now here was Jesus, doing one more thing that only God should have been able to do: literally walking on water.

To make matters worse, Jesus announced himself in a divine way. He said, "Take courage, do not be afraid, I am God." Our New Revised Standard Version says, "Take heart." Ut uh. "Take courage," is what Jesus said. Jesus used this exhortation in extreme situations. The last time was when the last storm raged and the disciples had feared for their lives. In the Bible, take courage means "gather your faith," because faith is the opposite of fear.

There's a modern day mega-church evangelist, Joel Olsteen, who has based his ministry on this biblical message: "Take courage." Joel has different ways of saying this message that Jesus shared. Here are a few. "Faith is about trusting in God when you have unanswered questions." That one isn't bad. It's kind of long, though. So is this one, "Fear steals your joy and enthusiasm. Focus on faith and let God deal with your fear." How about this one, "Fear and faith have something in common. They both ask us to believe in something we cannot see." Joel finally found a shorter version of his message, "Faith activates God; fear activates the enemy."

I don't disagree with Joel about the importance of recognizing and rejecting fear when it keeps us from connecting with God. But WE cannot "activate" God. What we can do is INVITE God into our hearts and our lives. By acting in faith, we strengthen our relationship with God. Our faith says "yes" to God's invitation, just as our fear says "no" to God.

Our Bible study group jokes that the answer to all our "why" questions is "free will." God has given us the choice of acting in faith or in fear. Jesus urges us to "take courage" and act in faith, then he shows us how to do just that. He walked on water. And he showed us that we can do this, also, in a way. To quote Joel Olsteen one more time, "The same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives on inside each of us."

But Peter didn't know that when he saw Jesus walking on water. Jesus hadn't yet been crucified and raised from the dead, and he hadn't yet sent the Holy Spirit to strengthen the faith

of each of his disciples. What Peter knew was that Jesus was doing something that only God should have been able to do. But Jesus didn't stop there. He said, "It is I." Actually, he said, "I am," just as God had identified himself when Moses had asked God what his name was. In other words, Jesus told his disciples, "Yes, I am walking on the water, friends. Take courage, disciples. have faith; I am God."

What was the disciples' response? Presumably eleven of them kept rowing in awe and wonder. Peter said, "If it is you, Lord, let me come to you."

What we don't know is this: Was Peter testing Jesus like the Pharisees had tested Jesus? Was Peter saying, "Prove it's really you, Jesus, by letting me come to you." Or was he saying, "Jesus, I want to be with you. Will you teach me walk on water just as you are doing?"

In other words, did Peter get out of the boat to test Jesus, or to test himself? We just don't know Peter's motives. So we give Peter the benefit of the question. But the question remains, "Why WOULD someone get out a perfectly good boat in a raging storm?" This question reminds me of a joke I used to ask airborne combat troops, "Why WOULD someone jump out of a perfectly good airplane, anyway?"

The answer of course, is that we leave a good situation for a more perilous one when we have a mission, when we believe that is what God wants us to do so. Or we do it to test God. Testing Jesus takes a lot of hutzpah, but we do this all the time, don't we? We say, "If you let me live, Lord, I'll give you all my money." Or we beg, "Give me a sign to show me you exist, to show me that you care for me."

Whatever Peter's motive, on THIS day Peter learned some valuable things that his experience shares with us: Whatever **our** motive, we, too, can do miraculous things with the permission of Jesus, if we don't get distracted or immobilized by fear—as long as we keep our focus on Jesus.

You may know from social media that I was in Centreville yesterday with 1,100 or so clergy from all over our Commonwealth of Virginia while over 6,000 modern-day Klansman and Neo Nazis rolled into town. No white robes. No hoods. Just guns and armor and swastikas and hate. Lots of yelling and violence. This is how I got to practice today's lesson yesterday while providing "safe haven," a metaphorical boat of safety for those doing the hard work of peaceful confrontation, standing in the presence of this evil. There was a lot of fear in our "boat." But our message was, "Take courage. I am here, in a most difficult disguise. Get out of the boat."
