

## “In or Out of the Boat?”

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

August 13, 2017

### [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

Last week, we talked about a couple different understandings of the feeding of the multitudes. I think it's healthy to look beyond usual viewpoints, particularly of familiar passages of Scripture. Often, it is difficult for us to truly hear familiar texts in a new way, but it is good to stretch our minds and spirits by considering the text in a different light. Today, we are focusing on the familiar story of Peter walking on the water and I'd like for us to also take a look at it from two different angles. First, some background:

This text comes right after last week's text of the feeding of the multitudes, which follows Jesus receiving the news that John the Baptizer has been executed. You may recall that Jesus was trying to get away from the crowds for a time of personal grieving over the terrible death of His cousin, when the crowds followed Him, eventually leading to the miraculous feeding. In this week's gospel lesson, Jesus finally does get away for a little private prayer. After the feeding of the multitudes, Jesus sends the disciples away across the sea, dismisses the crowds, and heads up the mountain by Himself. Meanwhile, the disciples run into a bad storm.

The disciples were going across the Sea of Galilee, which is not a particularly large body of water. It is about 13 miles long and about 8 miles wide at its widest point. It was at most about 140 feet deep. The sea was particularly rough in storms. Some have compared it to holding a shallow pan of water in your hands and tipping it from side to side. The winds blowing back and forth over the water cause the shallow water of the Sea of Galilee to rock back and forth. Matthew tells us that the boat was “battered by the waves” and that the disciples were really afraid. Part of that might be due to the late hour. Matthew tells us that this took place “early in the morning.” Other translations say “in the fourth watch,” which was between 3 and 6 AM. So, between 3 and 6 in the morning, when the disciples are probably well past tired and they are being battered by the wind and the waves, they look up and they see someone walking to them on the sea. By now, they are terrified. Is this a ghost? Jesus says to them in our translation “Take heart, it is I.” The Greek

words that are translated as “it is I” here are “*Ego Eimi*,” which literally translates to something like “I am.” This is the name that God gave when Moses asked for God’s name in Exodus. *I am*. It is the name that eludes meaning. We cannot ever fully understand who God truly is.

However, even though the name defies meaning, the disciples would have clearly recognized it as the divine name. The Greek words mean “to be or to exist eternally or to have timeless being.” Jesus wasn’t just saying “Hey, guys – settle down, it’s me, Jesus.” He was saying to them “Fear not, because *I am*.” The eternal, timeless Word of God was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus says there’s no reason to fear because *I am*. *I am timeless, I am eternal*. It’s not just an identification of who it was that was walking on the water. It is an identification of just who Jesus is – God incarnate.

Then Peter says “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Now, I part ways with Peter here. When I’ve been out on the water in a boat, no matter how rocky the waves have gotten, I’ve not had any desire to leave the boat and go for a stroll on the waves. But Peter, who often got things wrong, maybe gets this one right. He wants to be where Jesus is. He knows that there is no safety in the boat when Jesus is there outside of the boat and so he wants to go to Jesus. Jesus just says “Come” and Peter hops out of the boat and starts walking right toward Jesus.

Unfortunately, that does not last very long. He feels the strong wind and he gets scared and he takes his eyes off Jesus. And you know what happens – he begins to sink. But maybe it’s now that the real test occurs. He’s sinking and he’s probably not very far from the boat. He could call on the disciples to rescue him, to throw out a net to grab on to. He could have asked them to reach out an oar. He could have tried to swim back to the boat. If you were safely inside the boat just a minute before, wouldn’t you go back in that direction? But that’s not what Peter does. He cried out “Lord, save me!” Instead of turning toward the boat and its safety, he turned back toward Jesus, to the great *I am*, who provides us with eternal safety.

Isn’t Peter’s story our story? We embark on some venture of faith and start out strong, only to soon feel the wind howling around us and the waves churning under our feet, and we take our eyes off Jesus. And then, of course, we start to sink. But what do we do with the real test that comes next – do we go forward into the arms of Christ, or do we try to swim backward to the boat, to the safety of what we were doing before? Jesus calls us to walk on the chaotic waters of the world and He bids us “Come!”

Or maybe sometimes He doesn’t.

There's a detail in this story which takes us down a different path. If we look at verse 28, it isn't actually Jesus' idea that Peter should walk toward Him on the water. It's *Peter's* idea. Jesus says only one word "Come," and that is in response to *Peter* suggesting this whole "walking on the water" business. This wasn't some test of Peter's faith that Jesus came up with. This was Peter's idea, and it was basically a test of Jesus – if it is you, command me to come to you on the waters! Why did Peter go walking on the water? Because *Peter* wanted to – and here's the problem: maybe Jesus didn't *want* Peter walking on the water. Jesus knew that everyone in the boat was scared. He knew that they had been rowing and rowing, struggling against the waves and the wind. Their boat was being "battered by the waves" and I imagine it took all of their strength to keep the boat from capsizing. So, did the other disciples need Peter to quit rowing and go jump out of the boat? Probably not! Did Jesus need Peter to get out of the boat? Probably not! This was strong-willed Peter and what he wanted to do. Jesus said "do not be afraid" and Peter didn't take Jesus at His word. Peter had to put Jesus to the test – "*if it is you, Lord.*" Peter tests Jesus and leaves behind the other disciples who need his help. Peter's decision did not consider the needs of his group and it didn't consider the instructions of Jesus. "Do not be afraid," Jesus told them all. And maybe the 11 who stayed in the boat took Jesus at His word. They didn't say "*if it is you, Lord*" and they didn't devise any tests for Jesus. Maybe they trusted that Jesus had told them to not be afraid, and that's all they really needed to know. They said "Truly you are the Son of God!"

And so, we have two possible points of view from this text. The first is that Jesus is encouraging us to *step out of* the boat and the other is that Jesus is encouraging us to *stay inside* the boat. Which one is it? I think the answer is *both*, at different times. There are times when Jesus is calling us to step out of the ordinary situations, step out of the ways that we've always done things, and to try new things. But there are also times when Jesus is calling us to stay in the boat and keep rowing, keep pushing against the waves and the wind, keep propelling the boat forward. Either way, we are called to keep our eyes on Jesus. We are called to listen for the voice of our God and to follow, whether that following is by taking the big, dramatic steps out onto the water, or whether that following is to keep rowing the boat in the way that Jesus is leading. We shouldn't just jump to our conclusions and leave the rest of the group behind, struggling against the oars. We should listen for the voice of God and then follow that voice, wherever it may lead us.

The waters of the world around us are turbulent. At times, God is calling us to step out onto the waters, with faith. In those times, we must step out onto the water, secure in the knowledge that our God is the great *I am*. There is nothing that we need fear. At other times,

though, God is calling us to keep rowing, keep pressing against the waves. In those times, we still need not fear. In either case, the first step is to listen for the call of God on our lives and keeping our eyes on Jesus. We begin by putting aside ourselves and focusing solely on what God wants us to do, and then we go forth with faith, saying "Truly you are the Son of God" as we listen for Jesus to say to us "O, You of great faith!" Amen