

Matthew 14:13-33

How do feeding a hungry crowd and walking on the raging sea fit into Matthew's story as it flows from the murder of John the Baptist to the Transfiguration, with stops to consider tradition and faithfulness and threat along the way? The murder of John fits well in this flow. He is not identified in Matthew's story as a relative or cousin of Jesus - unlike Luke's version. He is killed because he is an observant Jew, not submissive to the dominant power.

Older interpretation worried over the miraculous elements of these stories. How could they be understood as events without violating the laws of nature? Too often communities of faith have insisted on the absolute historicity of miracles, regardless of the impact on scientific sense. Interpretation in recent centuries has attempted to divert this energy by reading the feeding as a miracle of sharing rather than of magical generation.

Whether Jesus suspended the natural order to feed the five thousand or whether his example simply prompted the crowd to share what it already had, these were not the concerns of the earliest Christians. Matthew told us in his first chapter that Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us", and for the one who made the world out of nothing and created light from darkness, multiplying some fish and loaves was no major feat. Besides, Jesus wasn't the only one hailed as a messiah. He wasn't even the only one to

claim to be the son of God. Most of the Caesars did that! Neither Jesus nor his early followers imagined that stories about wondrous acts would convince people of Jesus' divine origins. Rather the wonders Jesus performed, as John in his gospel is most consistently adamant about, were always *signs* of the character of the God whose presence Jesus bears.

In the first miracle, the point isn't *what* Jesus does, but *why*. The character of the God Jesus reveals and represents is captured in a single word, "compassion". Matthew says that when Jesus saw the great crowd that had followed him he had *compassion* for them. And so he healed their sick, tended their needs, and shared with them his presence. Then, when evening came and they found themselves without food, he fed them.

The context of this scene begins with: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." The thing Jesus heard was John the Baptist's murder by King Herod at a feast. The juxtaposition couldn't be more ironic, or powerful. One moment Matthew invites us to focus on one more episode from the "lifestyles of the rich and shameless" and in the next he fastens our attention on a scene portraying poor, sick, homeless, and hungry crowds looking for relief. It's like switching channels from the Kardashians to a news report on Syrian refugee children in Jordan. Matthew is indicating, by these contrasting scenes, just what kind of God Jesus represents.

In the first century, gods aren't normally supposed to care about people like the crowds. The gods of the ancient philosophers were considered dispassionate and so were regularly referred to by names like "the Unmoved Mover" or "First Cause." At the other end of the spectrum, the gods of the Greek and Roman empires were notorious for using humans as playthings and for ordering the world to their whims. At best, gods were supposed to take the side of the rich and powerful, to stand with people like Herod and his well-fed party guests, sanctioning their exploitation of the poor, and even the bloody murder of a truth-teller like John the Baptist. They were definitely *not* known for siding with the oppressed, the ordinary, the downtrodden, or the hungry.

And yet that is what happens here as Jesus renews, embodies, and fulfills the consistent call of the God of Israel - to feed the hungry. That was no minor endeavour. What we now refer to as "food scarcity" wasn't only *known* in the ancient world, it was *rampant*. So the disciples' suggestion that these hordes of people go buy food isn't just unrealistic – they are, after all, out in a deserted place – it's ridiculous, and even a little insulting, as the people making up this desperate crowd probably didn't have money to buy food in the first place. And so Jesus tells his disciples to get over their callous self-concern and feed the people themselves.

The bread, the fish and the people are counted and the result is overwhelming. But Jesus takes the opportunity to use the disciples, even

when they would rather look after themselves, to tend the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children. Using words and actions foreshadowing the Last Supper, Matthew depicts what happens when one moves from a worldview of scarcity – “we have nothing here but five loaves and fishes” – to one of abundance – “thank you God, for these five loaves and fishes”. Whatever their initial skepticism, or doubt, or self-preoccupation, the disciples are caught up in Jesus’ words of abundance and gratitude and distribute what they have and participate in the wonder and joy that “all ate and were filled.” God used even these reluctant disciples to care for the poor and hungry whom God loves so very much.

The deadly chaos of the walking on water scene fits well into Matthew’s story of enveloping violence. Herod, Pilate, and ultimately Rome are arrayed against the Jewish community that is waiting for the world to be turned right-side-up. Herod, Pilate, and Rome like the world the way it is, and act effectively to hold it that way. Violence rules, and Rome uses its power over life and death to guarantee that this reign continues, despite the Lord’s Prayer and the protests of other faithful Jews.

Walking on water can be read as a demonstration of Jesus’ power over chaos. However, it doesn’t stop Rome from capturing and crucifying Jesus, wringing from him a cry of despair. Christians have become too accustomed to Jesus’ death. We think of it as a victory, as part of a rational economy that brings freedom and forgiveness, and we forget

that it was a death by torture, that, according to Paul, was scandalous and moronic.

Yet Paul himself was executed by Rome, in Rome, where beheading was understood very much as it is today, as a demonstration of unstoppable power and as a challenge to anyone who would stand in opposition to that power.

Things had become much worse by the time that Matthew's story was told in the form we now have it. Paul died before the First Jewish Revolt was underway, before the agony of the siege of Jerusalem, before that shock of the destruction of stability and order in the form of the Temple, before the gospels were written. By the time Matthew's story was circulated, Rome had demonstrated repeatedly that it cared not at all for any assertion of order other than its own. Jesus' little excursion on the surface of the chaotic waters, seen in this context, seems insignificant and ineffectual. This may well have occurred to Peter as he began to sink beneath the waves.

The scene begins with Peter saying to Jesus, "If you are you" and ends with the disciples saying, "You are the Son of God". This statement is a pre-echo of the words spoken by the centurion at the crucifixion, but there are differences between the two scenes. Here the words are spoken because Peter is alive; at the end of the story, they are spoken because Jesus is dead. Peter's words are an amazed exultation; the

centurion's can be seen as a taunt intended to demonstrate that Rome alone controls life and death.

This is not the first time a dialogue with Jesus has begun with the words *if you are*.

Earlier in Matthew's story, during the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus is repeatedly tested and given a chance to demonstrate his freedom from danger, his mastery of chaos. He refuses, even though these demonstrations would have established him, in the eyes of the tester, as the son of God. He was even tempted to turn stones into bread to abate his hunger. But, Jesus passes the tests by refusing to demonstrate or use his mastery. Yet, in today's story, he willingly chooses to demonstrate his mastery and his power.

Perhaps the difference is that, in the wilderness, Jesus was fasting and alone as he experienced the pangs of hunger, while in today's scene the hunger belongs to a huge crowd of people, larger than the population of any of the local villages. Perhaps he makes the decision to use his power because it is Peter, not Jesus, who is actually sinking beneath the waves. The story is in a way a warning against the belief that chaos is easily tamed. In the midst of chaos, perhaps only faithfulness offers any hope.

It is often in the most challenging times of life that we sense God's

presence most clearly. There is something about significant challenges and trials that clarify our priorities and cut through the manifold distractions of everyday life so that we are able to see God more clearly. That is part of what is going on here. After feeding the thousands who followed him into the wilderness, Jesus commands the disciples to head across the sea without him, while he remains on shore to send the crowds on their way and then spends some time on the mountain in communion with his Father. While the disciples are crossing the sea, a storm arises threatening to engulf them. They spend the better part of an anxious night navigating the waves, and in the early hours of the morning Jesus strides across the water to meet them.

Mistaking Jesus for a wave-walking spectre or ghost, the disciples grow even more alarmed as he draws near. In response, Jesus reassures them that it really is he who is coming to them. His assurance works – and then some – as Peter finds the courage to ask if he might join Jesus out on the water. At first confident, given Jesus' assent, Peter soon becomes aware of the height of the waves and depth of the sea and loses heart, whereupon Jesus reaches out and grabs him. While Jesus remarks on his lack of faith, it is at this moment that the disciples see Jesus as if for the first time, confessing, “Truly you *are* the Son of God.”

It's surprising that Jesus just fed thousands upon thousands of helpless and vulnerable people, revealing both divine power and divine compassion, and yet it's here, at this very moment of extremity, that the

disciples perceive most clearly who Jesus is. This passage reveals something deeply true about humanity, and the disciples were probably not alone in their reaction. We often overlook God's presence in the peaceful and pleasant parts of our lives, yet call out in earnest when things take a difficult turn.

We spend a good part of our time and energy trying to establish a stable, safe, and secure life, both for us and those we love. There is nothing wrong with that. God wants us to flourish, to have stability and security in our lives. But all too often we become aware of our modest success and assume we no longer need God, or at least forget how much a part of our lives God is and wants to be. Or perhaps we confuse safety and stability with abundant life. Either way, we can forget how much we depend on God, until tragedy strikes in the form of illness or job loss, or the end of a relationship, or some grave mistake we've made, and suddenly our ongoing need for God becomes painfully clear.

But the story doesn't only tell us about ourselves, it also tells us about God in two ways. Firstly, no matter what it is that reminds us of our need for God, God still responds. Just as Jesus reassures the disciples, and reaches out to grab hold of Peter, God, too, responds to us with compassion and support. And, more importantly, God not only responds to our need, but actually wants us to live lives of abundance and courage. Jesus commanded the disciples to cross the sea to go ahead of him, trusting them to navigate both sea and storm. And while some

commentators may suggest that Peter's request to join Jesus upon the waves is a mark of impetuous foolishness, there may have actually been some delight in Jesus' summons to Peter to come out from the boat.

Jesus' three-fold response to the disciples was unexpected. First, he urges them to "take heart". Second he reveals his presence with, among, and for them. While some translations have Jesus uttering "*It is I,*" the actual Greek is more sparse, succinct, and significant: "*I am*" - reminiscent of Moses' encounter with God - the "*I am*". Neither the disciples nor Matthew's audience would mistake the pronouncement of the divine name. Third, having revealed his presence and identity, Jesus then encourages the disciples once more, to leave fear behind and live "whole-hearted" lives.

This is *still* God's dream for us. God desires, that we trust that God is with us and for us and thereby live our lives with courage and hope, taking chances, risking ourselves in relationship, seeking the welfare of the individuals and community around us, all the while remembering that even when we overlook God's presence, God is always there, sometimes to encourage us to overcome our fears, sometimes sending us out ahead, and sometimes reaching out to grab hold of us in forgiveness, mercy, comfort, and grace.

God is always with us in the difficult parts of our lives, responding to our fears and cries for help with the promise of God's presence and comfort.

God, like any parent, has hopes and dreams for us, both as individuals and as a community of faith. God is there to encourage us to cross rough waters and even to step out of the boat in faith, trusting that God is there to grab hold of us in need. God is always eager to respond to our deepest needs. God invites us to more adventuresome lives of faith, and wants more for us than simply safety and stability. God calls us to stretch, to grow, and to live into the abundant life God has promised each one of us as well as our community of faith as we trust that God is always with us.

At times we may wonder why we've been sent to cross what feels like very rough water. And at other times we may feel that God is calling us out of our comfort zone. And at still others, we may wish very much that we would have stayed in the boat. But no matter where we find ourselves, know this: God is there for us, revealing God's presence, promising comfort, and calling forth courage. What we do matters, for as Paul writes, "yours are the beautiful feet that bring the message of good news to God's beloved people". Thank God for each and everyone of you as you respond to God's call with faith, hope, and courage as you are called out of your comfort zone to face the rough waters of life.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR FEBRUARY 12, 2023

God, You have called us to be a people of prayer— to continue the ministry of intercession handed on to us by Jesus Christ Himself. And so we come before You with confidence, bringing our prayers for the world you love.

We pray for those who, like Jesus' disciples, find themselves surrounded by high winds and stormy seas; those who feel overwhelmed by events and circumstances — the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, chronic pain, addiction, depression, or divorce — and who don't know where to turn.

We pray for those who, find themselves deeply wounded by people they love — people they thought they knew and trusted — and who are struggling to know how to respond.

We pray for those who are experiencing a crisis of faith; who long to whole-heartedly trust in God but are held back by questions and doubts.

We pray for those who have fallen into despair; who have begun to doubt God's presence and power; or question God's call in their lives.

We pray for those who have had their hopes and dreams crushed; those whose lives have suddenly taken a different turn, and who now wonder what lies ahead for them.

We pray for those who are facing illness, medical treatments and therapies, life altering diagnosis, and prolonged healing, and at times feel lost and look to you for hope, comfort, and peace.

Loving God, it is not Your will that any should suffer. We offer our prayers for all those who hunger and thirst, those who live in the midst of violence or poverty, especially all the migrants, all the asylum seekers, refugees, and those who feel abandoned or ignored by the world around them.

We pray for those whose lives have been turned upside down by natural

disasters, especially the people in Turkiye and Syria who experienced a massive earthquake, destroying cities and towns, and causing death to thousands. Support those who are digging through the rubble looking for survivors and all the volunteers that are providing food and shelter.

Grieving God, be present with all your people who, against their will, have been dragged into conflicts and wars, not of their own will, especially the people of Ukraine. Be with them as they face the fear, the lives lost, and devastation brought on by a war no one understands.

Through the life-giving power of Your Holy Spirit, make Your sustaining presence known to all who are in pain or need, so that they, too, may know Your love and live. In the name Jesus Christ, our Saviour, who lives to intercede for us, **Amen**.