

Psalm 23
John 6:16-21

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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WALKING IN WATER

When they had rowed about three or four miles,
they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. *John 6:19*

The incident of Jesus walking on water (I'll get to the walking *in* water later), is a classic example of how every passage of scripture has to be understood on its own terms. What naturally happens when we recall a Bible story is that we mix elements of similar stories together from different gospels. The Christmas story is a good example in that only Matthew tells of the visitation of the wise men from the east, while only Luke tells of the visit of the shepherds, but both invariably finish up in our annual Christmas nativity scenes as one big family reunion. Luke says Jesus was born in a stable (most likely a cave used as a stable) while Matthew says he was born in a house. So our crèches look like open stables with a western house roof. Unfortunately, what happens in the midst of these confluences, these merging of sources, is that the unique perspective and message of each gospel writer gets lost. They sort of lose their personality.

Which reminds me of the story of twin brothers who were tragically separated at birth. One was named Amal and the other Juan. Years went by of frantic searching by their parents desperate to be reunited with them, but to no avail. Then, out of the blue, a letter came from Juan, who similarly had tried to track down his parents. His birth mother was in tears pouring over the letter and the accompanying photograph.

"Oh, this is wonderful," she cried kissing and caressing Juan's photograph. "Now, if only we could see a photo of his twin, Amal."

Her husband, eager to console, said, "Well, not to worry, my dear. After all, if you've seen Juan, you've seen Amal."

However, while biblical narratives on the same event may look like twins, they are far from it. Each has its particular perspective, and the "walking on water" stories in Mark, Matthew and John are a good example.

In each gospel the crossing of the sea comes directly after the feeding of the multitude. Only in Matthew, however, does Jesus invite Peter to walk on the water. In John Jesus does not insist that the disciples go on ahead of him in the boat, they just leave when, after some time, they seem not to have seen him (6:16b). Luke, who like Matthew uses so much of Mark, omits the story completely. John, however, does an odd thing. The phrase translated of Jesus “walking on the sea” in verse 19 is identical to one translated “walking *by* the sea” in John 21. It’s the little preposition *epi* which can mean on, about, near or by. No sooner have they seen him they run aground on this shore, and the desperate crossing they have endured, imperiled by storm and wind and darkness, is over, with Jesus there to greet them. What’s especially instructive is that in John’s gospel, this is not intended as one of the precisely seven miracles or signs (which perhaps favors translating it as Jesus “walking by the sea”). Instead, the narrative is a commentary on who Jesus is: the “I am”—Jesus’ self designation here, reminiscent of God naming himself from the burning bush to Moses (Exodus 4). John also wants to show that Jesus, whom the reader is still fully to discover by chapter 6, is the one greater even than Moses who also led the people through the seas, gave them food in the wilderness (miraculous quail and “manna” a hoar frost bread-like substance), and teaches them a new law. All these events are here emulated in John 6 by Jesus in reverse order: teaching, feeding, and his followers safe passage through the sea.

The fear and aloneness, the sense of abandonment in the midst of the threatening storm that the disciples experience, is so sharply contrasted with Jesus’ sudden appearance. This is John’s point—that lack of visible presence is not the same as absence. Jesus is there for us not by miraculous intervention but by custodial presence that knows where we are at all times, and is there to meet us. Here is the liberating presence of Jesus in their so suddenly coming to land, their “salvation” from the cruel sea. Their shock is that he was all the time looking out for them. This absence, yet presence, is the mark of Jesus for the church. He teaches us to trust, not by miraculous intervention, which cultivates little more than the doting, hovering parent to an anxious child. Instead he cultivates a trust such that we pass through the waters with more confidence than fear. I did not say *without* fear.

Do you remember, perhaps as a child, the experience of trying to walk in the water, especially neck deep in the water. How difficult it was to keep balance or feel that you were making progress. Times of stress feel like walking *in* water. Like a dream in which every move is reduced to an agonized slow motion.

On the way back from the hospital the other day I drove down 252 and came across a most compelling sight. I was the lead car leaving the light at the bottom of the hill, when up ahead, a grey goose at the side of the road cast an overseer's eye at the gaggle behind it, then stepped awkwardly down into the first lane. One by one the other geese followed, in what I imagine was a line of seniority, each plopping itself with less than balletic grace off the curb and into the road. In the far two lanes traffic was hurtling by at breakneck Mainline pace, but the leading goose, with steely resolve and stately waddle (with an almost exaggerated slowness), turned neither to the left or right, but forged ahead like the general in Picket's Charge. Our stream of traffic slowed to a halt before this line of promenading geese. The youngest members at the end of the line seemed most reluctant to charge into the valley of death like this, but the others encouraged them with little squawks and backward glances, and they, too, finally hurled themselves onto the asphalt after their kin. Never once did the lead goose falter, never sped up, never a hint of retreat, and the oncoming traffic came to a respectful stop. For a full minute—a long time in our “faster!” world, four lanes of traffic stalled with their occupants lost in wonder and admiration. Now these geese had all, no doubt, flown a thousand or more miles to get here in the first place, so another 100 feet above this suicidal pilgrimage would hardly be an inconvenience. Yet here they were—crossing the road. It was the most extraordinary sight. And we think we own this place!

A custodial presence that takes us only where we want to go, only where it's safe and convenient to go, would hardly “stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood” to the demands of the world. It would do little to encourage leadership. It would do nothing to cultivate a vibrant and resilient faith.

Amen.