

Lectio for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM

The Gospel passage that we have for today is often headed “Jesus walks on water,” indicating that Jesus is doing something miraculous. However, what we really have here in Matthew is a “theophany”—a revelation about who Jesus really is, and a challenge to us, as disciples, about whether we can trust and believe this revelation.

This is the second time in Matthew’s gospel that Jesus is shown as having power over the water. In Mt 8:23-27 he is *with* the disciples in the boat and he calms the sea in the midst of a storm. Here he shows himself to “be like God,” calling to mind many references in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as Psalm 77, which recall how Israel was led by God through the sea: “your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen” (v. 19). Or Job 9:8, “He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea”; and where God answers Job “out of the storm”: “Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?” (Job 38:16). As the late Jesuit biblical scholar, Dan Harrington, points out, there is a rich heritage in the Hebrew Scriptures for the idea of distress at sea and how God calms the rough waters. A particularly vivid one is from Ps. 107: 23-32

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters;
they saw the deeds of God, God’s wondrous works in the deep,
For God commanded, and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their evil plight;
they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits end.
Then they cried out to God in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress;
God made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Then they were glad because they had quiet, and God brought them to their desired haven.¹

Let us thank God for this steadfast love, for these wonderful works to God's people!
Let them extol God in the congregation of the people,
And praise God in the assembly of the elders²

Images of drowning and rescue are frequent in the Psalms. Psalm 69 for example has the speaker describing "I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me." (v. 15). The speaker cries out "Save me, O God, let not the flood sweep over me." Here, in our passage, Jesus does what God does: he stretches forth his hand and rescues the disciple (Cf. Ps 144:7). But Matthew makes it most clear that in walking on the sea, Jesus is doing what *God* does (rescuing those in danger of drowning) when Jesus says to the disciples, "Take heart, it is I (*ego eimi*), do not be afraid. This saying, literally, "I am," recalls God's revelation to Moses in the burning bush. It was the primary message for Matthew's community concerning the identity of Jesus, who was now absent from them. He is the one who does what God does.

To return to the passage again, we see that Jesus, unlike the passage in Mt 8 is not in the boat. He made the disciples go on to the other side of the lake, while he went up the mountain alone, to pray. We're then told about what is happening to the disciples in the boat: it is in the middle of the sea, well perhaps not literally (the Greek says "many *stadia* away from

¹ As I was preparing this reflection I was thinking particularly about this verse of the psalm in relation to young mothers who are struggling with infants or toddlers and how a cessation of crying, or the luxury of their nap time can create "a haven of quiet." My nextdoor neighbor recently gave birth to a son and I hear him fussing a lot and see her walking up and down the driveway outside my window., with him nestled in her "baby bjorn." What a relief when he finally falls asleep and she can sit down and rest. I also recall my own mother who at one point had five children under the age of three (she had triplets when she already had a thirteen-month old, and then another baby following the triplets), so when she had a baby sitter, would go over to the cemetery not far from our house, where there was a beautiful mausoleum that had a huge vault where one could sit and pray. It was cool and quiet, her "haven." We used to laugh at this, but I now see it was her place of refuge from the often overwhelming duties of parenting and child care. So, the "storms" that batter us about need not always take place on boats on the sea.

² Adapted from Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, *The Gospel of Matthew. Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2007), 226. I am relying a great deal on Harrington's commentary in this reflection.

the land” –a *stadion* was about 200 yards). Nevertheless, Matthew wants to emphasize that there is a wide separation between the disciples and Jesus. They are being “battered by the waves” (Harrington says that the term in Greek is better translated as “being harassed,” which carries the connotation of torture, or torment) and the wind is “against them.” Our NRSV translation says that it is “early in the morning” when Jesus comes walking toward them. Other translations are more specific and say it was “the fourth and last watch of the night” which would have been between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. This was the Roman designation for the final hours before dawn. Who has not been awakened at this hour of the night—perhaps because of a bad dream, or anxiety about things we have to do, worries about our own health, or that of a loved one. These are the storms of ordinary life. Sometimes they are so threatening that they literally disturb our sleep.

When the disciples see Jesus walking on the sea, we feel the range of their emotions: terror, fear, they think they are seeing “a ghost”. Interestingly, Matthew omits the phrase that Mark has in his account. Mark says, “he was about to pass them by.” Rather, after they “cry out in fear” Jesus immediately speaks to them: “Take heart (literally, take courage), it is I, do not be afraid. The injunction, “do not fear” recalls Isaiah 43, in which God says, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

What is new in this passage, compared to the Markan parallel is the role of Peter. He faces down this “ghost” with what sounds like an impertinent challenge in the face of their predicament: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Perhaps this strikes a familiar chord in you? It does in me. Something like, “OK if this is really what you want me to do, or if this really is your will, show me, prove it!” And Jesus says, simply: “Come”

Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water (apparently, without thinking!) and “came toward” Jesus. But (and here is his almost fatal mistake) he notices the wind, he becomes frightened, and begins to sink. This too, I believe is something we can all relate to. Once we take our eyes off of Jesus, we become distracted, we become self-obsessed, unable to trust others, locked up in our own neediness, and sink into desolation. The only way out is to do exactly what Peter does: to cry out, “Lord, save me!”

Without that cry, there is no salvation. There is no connection with God unless we admit that we are in need. Jesus “immediately reached out his hand and caught him.” This reminded me of trapeze artists who have to learn to let go and trust that their partners will grasp their hands. Without “letting go” of the bar they are hanging on to, they remain stuck in a position that will ultimately have destructive consequences. Sr. Imelda Mauer, CDP has a blog called “Sister of Providence” where she uses the image of trapeze artists to display how important the dynamic of “letting go” is in life. She embeds a video clip in her blog that is an excellent illustration. In fact, the challenge of “letting go” is probably the one continual challenge of every person’s life, no matter what stage of life in which we find ourselves.³

Jesus then chides Peter (and each of us), “you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Notice that he doesn’t say, “you of no faith” –he calls it “little faith.” It is not about being perfect, or having no faith, but about our “little faith.” And don’t we usually sort of kick ourselves in the pants when we realize (“when the wind ceases”) that we should never have doubted?

³ Imelda Mauer’s blog can be found at <https://providencewomen.blogspot.com/2020/01/letting-go.html> The YouTube one-minute clip of the trapeze artists can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArLI_ZrcgBg

The theophany concludes with the disciples and Jesus together getting into the boat. The wind ceases and the disciples pay homage (the Greek word *proskyneō* appears nine times in Matthew to indicate “worship”) to him, thus confessing their faith in the identity of Jesus. The first reading for today, from the first book of Kings has Elijah waiting at the entrance of a cave for the Lord to “pass by.” He too, is asked to go outside, where he endures a major storm, with a heavy wind, an earthquake, and forest fire. He discovers that God was not in any of these dramatic displays. Only a tiny whispering sound is where God is finally to be found. It serves as a sort of counter-point to the theophany in the Gospel, reminding us that divine encounters occur in myriad, and often surprising ways.

As I reflected on this Gospel passage, the evangelical hymn, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus”⁴ kept coming into my head. I believe it’s used often by the British Jesuits in their podcast, “pray as you go” which I use frequently. This past week we celebrated the feast of the Transfiguration, so I thought it might be an appropriate meditation with which to end:⁵

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in his wonderful face
And the things of earth will go strangely dim
In light of his glory and grace.”

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czxd5oa-gi0>

⁵ In view of our reflection from past Sundays in Ordinary time, I interpret “letting the things of earth go strangely dim” as referring to those distractions, worries and fears that can weigh us down and prevent us from hearing the call of the Spirit to renew the face of the Earth.