

Walking on Water

sermon digest

May 15, 2011

Mark 6:45-56

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"Nature, red in tooth and claw," was Tennyson's observation in "In Memoriam," his struggle with grief over the death of a friend. If you don't agree, watch a few episodes of "Nature" on PBS or talk to some of the people driven out of their homes by the swollen Mississippi River or view the continuing TV news coverage of the tornadoes that raged through Alabama and Tennessee a couple of weeks ago. A walk through the woods on a spring day when the trees are coming to full bloom will almost make you forget the earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, and floods. You just need to stay away from media coverage of what is going on in the rest of the world. We cite the famous line from Job 1:21 at cemeteries: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." But many of us are not convinced that God is pulling the strings of nature in either birth or death. The Hebrew author of Job seems to be a little less certain that Yahweh, the Lord, gives and takes away life in the development of the story. The Jewish theology was dealing with neighborhood religions that worshiped the forces of nature. The Hebrew mind made the case that nature exists and operates under the direct authority and will of the Creator, yet Job defies the common wisdom of the day that nature gives us exactly what we deserve. Like everyone else, the Jews were often victims of nature; but, unlike their neighbors, they refused to bow before the forces of nature and declare that this is the sum totality of God. Jews worshiped the Creator of nature, but that did not solve all of the problems we have with the forces of nature.

The human story is a constant struggle against the threat of nature. The Gospels make no attempt to distinguish and classify the miracles of Jesus, but most interpreters note fairly clear categories that seem to come from distinct threats in the first century world. For example, Rudolf Bultmann distinguished nature miracles from healings and exorcisms. Exorcisms can be understood in light of the primitive world view of the New Testament, while healings then and now are not totally without merit or explanation. However, the nature miracles seem to put Jesus outside of the context in which we live and outside the bounds of human limitation. A docetic Christ, who, according to the Gnostics of early Christianity, only seemed to be human, is not one of us.

Last week I encountered an article in *Time Magazine* (Sept 10, 1965) on humor from the Lyndon Johnson presidency. Not so different from the treatment of other presidents, the press took careful aim at Johnson's ego, often comparing him with the messianic figure of Charles de Gaulle of France. In his banter with the press, he once quipped: "If one morning I walked on top of the water across the Potomac River, the headline that afternoon would read 'President Can't Swim.'" But the article enjoyed the superhuman role that Johnson assumed. One joke pictured Lyndon and Lady Bird coming upon a cow pond at the Johnson ranch. Lyndon asked, "Bird, do you see anyone watching? I am going to try walking across the pond again." Walking on water is a biblical metaphor for usurping the place of God. Anyone who arrogates to self the authority to defy the pull of gravity is delusional and probably needs psychiatric help. But we moderns have learned to defy the forces of nature. Leonardo da Vinci left sketches from the late fifteenth century of floatation shoes that would enable someone to walk on water as well as mechanical wings that would allow humans to fly.

In 1999, Israel's National Parks authority planned the construction of a submerged bridge without rails on Lake Galilee to allow tourists visiting the site of the Gospel story to get pictures of walking on water. The thirteen by twenty-eight foot floating bridge would be located at Capernaum near the tradition site of Jesus' miracle. Had the original disciples understood the commercial potential no doubt they could have made a mint building a bridge for believers and selling tickets for access.

Paul Achtemeier (*Interpretation*, Ap, 1962, 169-76) locates sea stories in the Gospels squarely in the Jewish theology of creation; they relate to the triumph of creation over chaos. The Jews were influenced by the Babylonian creation myth in which Marduk defeats the dragon Tiamat, goddess of the sea. Marduk divides the monster into waters above and below the earth, a stage in the Genesis 1 story. For Jews, the raging sea is always an image of the threat of the monster Tiamat, chaos, to break into the order of creation.

God is Lord over nature. Most of us can resonate with the disciples' struggle against the winds

of nature on the Sea of Galilee. They were in a small boat on a large lake known for its sudden squalls. According to the Gospels, they were not novices. They knew the lake and had probably been there before, ridden out the wind, and lived to tell the story to their grandchildren. But the seasoned sailors were also aware of boats that were now at the bottom of the lake because of such storms. They knew enough to be afraid. This may well be another version of the Mark 4 storm at sea; the same disciples are on the same lake probably in the same boat. Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat about to be swamped by a storm. The disciples are convinced that they are going under; the time had arrived to wake up their sleeping rabbi. Jesus awoke and spoke to the storm, "Peace, be still." Then he chided his disciples for their lack of faith. The winds died, the waves calmed, and the disciples were awed: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

In the second story, Jesus had just fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish, another nature miracle. The disciples take the boat across the lake, while Jesus stays behind to pray. From the shore, Jesus observes the "adverse wind" and the struggle of his disciples and decides to stroll across the lake with the intention of passing them by (perhaps as the glory of God passed by Moses in Exodus). When they cried out in fear, Jesus spoke, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he joined them in the boat, the wind ceased, and the disciples were "utterly astounded."

In both stories, nature is the overwhelming opponent to human life and progress, but nature exists within bounds set by the Creator. Jesus not only walks on top of the surging waters of nature, he speaks the very familiar word that identifies God in the Exodus, "It is I," literally "*I am*." When Moses asked the name of God, the reply was, "*I am*." John's Gospel repeatedly assures the reader of the identity of Jesus with the God of the Old Testament in the *ego eimi* sayings: *I am* the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate for the sheep; the good shepherd; God's Son; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth, and the life; the true vine. Regardless of the history behind the story, the intended message is an epiphany, an appearance of God. Rudolf Bultmann believed that it was a post-resurrection story that was inserted by Mark into the life of Jesus.

When the boat lands at Gennesaret, people from the entire region bring their sick for healing. The same Christ who feeds the multitude with a few pieces of bread and fish, who walks above the tumult of nature, is the one who overcomes the threat of disability and death in human disease. In every case the miracles speak to the human struggle with nature. Whether we are battling hunger, disease, or natural disaster, Christ is in unity and harmony with God, above it all. He walks on water.

The spiritual transcends the physical. In our scientific struggle to accommodate the nature miracle, we forget that Jesus is one like us dependent on God through prayer. According to the story, Jesus was seeking a place to pray when he encountered and fed the multitude. After the feeding of the multitude and before walking on water, Jesus resumed his spiritual quest for solitude and prayer. Thus, the Jesus who comes to the disciples on water is fresh from the inner-sanctuary of God's presence, spiritually renewed.

No mountain stands in the region where Jesus sought a place to pray. Evidently the reference to a mountain connects to the faith of Israel. The Temple was carefully located on Mount Zion. Moses met God on Mount Sinai. The Transfiguration of Jesus took place on an unnamed mountaintop. Like the giving of the Law in the Exodus, Jesus' sermon in Matthew is on the mount.

Regardless of what may have happened in the miracle on the sea, we need to recognize that the human Jesus was one with us in his need for spiritual renewal. Although somewhat skeptical of religion, Karen Armstrong in *A History of God* observed that our scientific culture has edited out the sense of the spiritual and the holy. No doubt, the world of nature is real and largely beyond our control; but is there anything more?

As I concede the power of nature both to bring life into the world and to devour life in the world, I affirm with my Jewish forebears God as Creator, Lord over nature. We are more than cells connected by protoplasm and organized into human bodies. Every human person is also a spiritual being made in the divine image, thus, connected to the Spirit God. The real world of nature threatens our very existence, but our hope reaches beyond the here and now. Our hope rests with the Eternal. With Christ we reach out to the God who transcends this world of nature, even the bounds of birth and death.