

The Wind, the Waves, and the Word Made Flesh

Matthew 14:22-33

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One of the unintended consequences of the Coronavirus is that we have had to make some major adjustments in our use of technology as a church. We have rapidly moved to filming our sermons. We have opened an Instagram account, our presence on Facebook and our website has become much more active, and we are in the process of upgrading our system here at church to have improved sound and a camera and computer that will allow us to stream our services...eventually. With all of these advancements I am feeling some pressure to improve the use of technology in my sermons, particular my sermon for this morning. The story of Jesus walking on the water lends itself to the latest in technology, and I think I have tapped into just the right use of modern technology to bring this sermon to life. Drumroll please...I bring to you Jesus walking on the water courtesy of the latest and greatest in modern technology...popsicle sticks.

When I told Julie my bold idea, she shook her head and said, "That will never work." I asked why. She said, "No one has popsicle sticks right now. Everyone is buying them and making homemade popsicles. You will never find popsicles during this pandemic." Instead of dampening my enthusiasm, I replied as only a perpetual child who is trapped in the body of a 59-year-old man would respond. "Then I'll have to buy a whole bunch of popsicles." Immediately my mind ran to fudgesicles, 50-50 bars, missile bars, popsicles with all those wonderful flavors like cherry, grape, and orange, good humor popsicles, Dove Bars, Ben and Jerry popsicles, and to satisfy the international taste, Haagen Dazs. Oh, I was going to have to do some serious research to preach with popsicle sticks. Friends, I was ready for the challenge. Just to be safe I checked at the craft store first. I was so disappointed when they said, "Of course we have popsicle sticks. And in all sizes." All my delightful dreams of consuming tasty frozen treats were dashed. Such are the challenges that confront a preacher.

Anyway, I am well supplied with popsicle sticks, so here comes the story. I have built a little boat out of the popsicle sticks. The boat is on this little set that is meant to look like a lake, with a sandy shore, and the sun is shining. It is a beautiful day. The boat has popsicle sticks in it, representing the disciples. Can you guess how many popsicle sticks are in the boat? You got it! There are 12 popsicle sticks in the boat. The 12 disciples are out in the boat on the water. Noticeably absent from the boat is a popsicle stick representing Jesus. Jesus stayed behind to pray while the 12 went out on the lake on the boat. A storm came up. If I was really was good at technology, I would have had some special effects to blow through and rock the waters, perhaps a fan, maybe even a hairdryer. But I failed technology 101, so we will do the next best thing. Use your imagination! The disciples were in a boat on

the lake and a big storm came up, raging and roaring winds, the waves were crashing over the side. The sun disappeared. Just when you need Jesus, just when the big storms of life come ripping your world apart, Jesus is not with you. What a terrible situation. But wait...here comes Jesus, walking on the water. He said to his disciples, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Jesus climbed in the boat and the wind died down. Jesus calmed the storm. The sun came back out and everything was okay.

This is such a wonderful story, and I worked so hard getting all these high-tech props together, I think I will tell it to you a second time. I really need to tell the story a second time because there is more to the story. In the first telling of the story, the popsicle stick Jesus is the same size as the disciples. That makes perfect sense. In fact, that is very important. Jesus was fully human. Jesus was like us in every way. Jesus was the same size as us.

And yet Jesus was also more than us. Jesus was bigger than us. This story in Matthew 14 is just one of many examples where we see in no uncertain terms that Jesus is bigger than us. This time when I tell the story, I'm going to take advantage of having shopped at a store that said we not only have popsicle sticks, we have them in several sizes. Now if I wanted to really show you that Jesus is bigger than us, I could have used a 2X4, or a yardstick, or something else that would make all these other popsicle sticks look small. Instead of a yardstick or a 2X4, I'm just using the biggest popsicle stick. And yet once again, let me encourage you to use your imagination.

Same scene...the disciples are in the boat on the water and a storm comes up. The sky grows dark. Jesus is not with them...just when you need Jesus, just when the big storms of life come ripping your world apart, Jesus is not with you. But wait...here comes Jesus...big Jesus...walking on the water. Big Jesus is important. Big Jesus does miracles. Big Jesus heals the sick, cleanses the leper, gives sight to the blind and opens the ears of the deaf. Big Jesus raises a little girl from the dead. Big Jesus feeds 5,000. The storm is raging and Big Jesus walks on the water. We worship a God who is almighty, who is all powerful, the God who rules heaven and earth. Our God walks on the water. That's Big Jesus. Big Jesus says, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Big Jesus gets in the boat and Big Jesus calms the storm. The sun comes back out and everything is okay.

When I bought my popsicle sticks, there were three sizes. Big Jesus is the biggest stick. The smallest sticks are normal Jesus and the normal disciples. There is a third size. It falls between the big and the little. I could call it the middle size stick, but in this particular story, the middle stick stands out because it is bigger than the normal stick. Something happens in this story that is unique to the gospel of Matthew. Jesus calms the storm in all four gospels. Jesus walks on the water in Matthew, Mark, and John. But it is only in Matthew that Peter gets out of the boat and walks toward

Jesus...yes, Peter walks on the water in the gospel of Matthew. When Peter gets out of the boat and walks on the water, I imagine Peter being bigger than a normal sized stick. This is a big deal, getting out of the boat and walking on the water toward Jesus.

By making Peter a bigger stick than the normal sized disciples, I want to be clear that I am not saying Peter is better than the other disciples, nor that Peter is more important than the other disciples. Jesus will make it clear over and over again that his kingdom is a kingdom of humility, not pride. The one who wants to be the greatest must learn to be the servant of all. Other kingdoms lord things over one another, but it is not that way in the kingdom of heaven. The last shall be first. At other places in the New Testament we read, "Do not think more highly of yourself than you should." We hear calls to humble ourselves. We are challenged to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus, who did not seek to be like God but instead humbled himself. And in the Body of Christ, every part is important. Every part matters. No part of the body is more important than any other.

If all of this is true, and I sincerely believe it is true, then why is Peter a bigger stick when he gets out of the boat? The reason I give Peter a bigger stick is because the Jesus who walks on the water has a habit of asking us to be bigger than we think is possible, to be more than we think we can be. Jesus calls us to step out of our little boats, to step out of our comfort zone, to step out of places that are safe and familiar, and to walk towards him...on the water if you will.

Maybe you will think of someone like Mother Teresa, who was more than we would ever expect one woman with a mission to be. Maybe you will think of John Lewis walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday. Maybe you will think of Millard Fuller who had a vision that people deserved to have an affordable home in which they could live, and he then started Habitat for Humanity. Maybe you will think of someone well known when you think of Peter walking on the water. These are good things to remember. Let us also think normal people, every day people, let us think of those who face challenges that are bigger than they feel they can face, and yet with faith in God these people step out onto the water. How many have fought to save a struggling marriage or poured their lives out to stand alongside a child facing a challenge or committed to serve in ways that felt far beyond their abilities. How many opened their heart, opened their home, opened their life to offer a safe place to someone who was struggling. How many have had no choice but to pick up the pieces of life after losing a loved one.

There is no end to the life situations that require us to get out of the boat, to walk toward Jesus even when the waves are rough, to keep our eyes focused on Jesus as he enables us to do with him what we could never do without him. Oh yes, when we do that, we are bigger than we normally are. When we do that, we are more than we

normally are. And even if we sink the story is not over, for Jesus takes us with him back in the boat and even when we fail or fall short, he still calms the storm. And the sun comes back out and everything is okay. What a great ending to the story. No matter what the situation, the sun comes back out and everything is okay.

I'm almost done with these popsicle sticks. I'm almost done. But I still have a little bit left. The story always ends the same. The sun comes back out and everything is okay. While that is true, I also want to bring something up that is very important. There is a moment when Jesus is in the boat with the disciples and the storm has not been calmed. It is a brief moment. It might have been only a few seconds. And yet there is a moment when Jesus is in the boat and the storm has not been calmed...yet. There is a moment when Jesus is in the boat and the sun has not come out...yet. There is a moment when everything is not okay...yet. That moment may be just a few seconds, but when you are in the midst of it, that moment can feel like an eternity. If Jesus is in the boat with us, shouldn't everything already be okay? Shouldn't the storm already be calm? Shouldn't the sun already be out? How can Jesus be with us, and yet the storm is still raging? Isn't he the Big Jesus that can do all things?

There is a part of me that wishes our story did not include those moments when Jesus is in the boat and the storm still rages. Wouldn't life be so much easier if as soon as Jesus stepped into our boat everything was resolved, every cloud disappeared, the waters grew calm, the sun came out, and everything was okay. If we were making up a fairy tale to read before we go to bed at night, that might be the story we would craft. But God did not make up a fairy tale when he sent Jesus to be with us. God chose to be with us in our real life that is lived in this real world filled with real trials, real tribulations, and real times of trouble. And he is with us. Jesus is with us in the most violent storms of life, when our little boat is taking on water and in danger of capsizing, when the winds are ripping the sails right from the mast, and the fear of drowning sweeps over us. Any God can be Big Jesus, walking on the water and doing miracles. Our God chooses to be small like us, to enter our world, to experience our hurts, to feel our pains and our disappointments, to wrestle with our doubts and our fears, to mourn with us in our sadness and our sorrow, to suffer our sufferings and to die our death. Our God did not fail us by being this type of a God. Our God saved us. He has been through every trial we have faced. He knows where we live. And he came to be with us because he loves us.

Because of that, I want to go even further. I want to say not only is Jesus with us when the storms threaten the boat, Jesus is there when the storms break the boat, when the craft is shattered into a thousand tiny little pieces. The boat Jesus enters sails not only on the sea. His boat enters Jerusalem, where despite the promising welcome he faces the ultimate rejection. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he entered the teeth of the storm. And that storm chewed him up and spit him out. Jesus entered

Jerusalem with 12 disciples in the boat with him. When that storm was over every single one of the disciples had either betrayed, denied, or deserted him. When the storm was over the boat was shattered and split apart. When the storm was over, Jesus was dead. Out of all those popsicle sticks, at the end he only needed two. The boat was destroyed. The storm was not calmed. And the sun refused to shine. Jesus suffered and died. Jesus suffered and died and was buried.

Looking at the wreckage and the ruins, looking at all that remains, just a little popsicle cross, it is almost impossible to imagine how this could be what we call good news. Of course, you undoubtedly know what happens on the third day, how the sun does come back out...the sun does shine again...the sun rises...isn't that a wonderful statement...the sun rises? The Son rises. Of course, we know that part of the story. But today I want to say this part of the story, this part about the wreckage and the ruin, this part about the cross that is raised right in the heart of the storm, this is also good news.

The cross that stands even while the storm rages is what helps us through our times of tragedy and our moments of deepest despair. We are in such a moment now, with the pandemic that has disrupted every aspect of our lives, racial unrest that has exposed centuries old wounds, a literal storm that has swept up the I-95 corridor, a blast in Lebanon that leveled Beirut. We are in that moment when we realize much of what we lean on for support has been stripped away. September 11, 2001 was like that. Something happened during those dark days after 9/11 that served as a powerful witness that God is with us in all things.

Molly Shotzberger was a major in the Salvation Army during 9/11. She was interviewed about her work at Ground Zero, amid the rubble and the ruin. What did she find? Was it a place God had abandoned? Was it a place God had chosen to ignore as he walked safely by on the other side of the street? Listen to what she discovered as she worked with the grieving, the wounded, the desperate.

“God was there when the iron workers went into the Census building. I get goose bumps thinking about it. They were checking the structure. Inside, the steel beams had fallen, and they had formed not one, but three crosses. The man leading them was a Christian. He said to the men with him, ‘Look, here’s Calvary.’ They all got down on their knees.

“Steve, one of the guys, came out and rushed to our tent. He said, ‘You know, I can’t tell you the last time I’ve been to church, but I’ll be there next Sunday.’

“People ask, ‘Where was God in all of this?’ He was there. He was always there. I looked at those men and women out there digging until their hands were raw, going beyond what they were able to do. The incredible ways people found to work through

their own grief, when they couldn't be at Ground Zero they still asked, 'How can I help?' And the applause of hundreds of people who lined the streets, cheering the workers as they left the site.

“For us, God was everywhere, giving us strength in overwhelming circumstances. I sensed his presence more in those two months than at any time I can remember.”¹

This could be just a silly sermon about popsicle sticks. Or this can be a sermon saying to all of us that if we hold tightly to God, if we cling to Jesus, if we never forget he is in the boat with us, if we have faith to believe the cross was not a tragic mistake but the truest expression of unconditional love that has ever been given, then I believe we will be able to say, “We sensed his presence more in those days of the Coronavirus than at any time I can remember.”

The storm is raging. Our Savior Jesus is saying to us, “Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.”

¹ Leadership magazine, Winter issue, 2002, p. 104.