

## “WOW!”

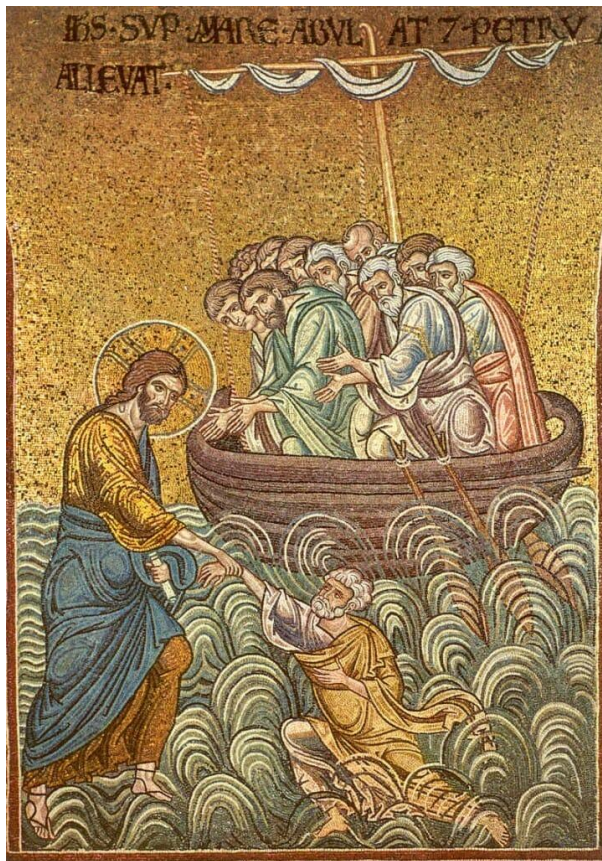
Psalm 66:1-12; Matthew 14:22-33

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

*Intro to gospel reading:* Three of the gospel writers tell this story about Jesus walking on water. Only Luke does not (though like Matthew and Mark he does tell about Jesus being asleep in a boat when a storm came up, and calming the storm after his frightened disciples woke him up). Today we're hearing Matthew's version of the story. *Read Matthew 14:22-33*

Today we are going to look at two pieces of art – created 800 years apart – that invite us into this story in different ways.



The first one is a mosaic from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, by an unknown artist or artists. You can see it in a cathedral in Palermo, Sicily.

Keep in mind that when this piece of art was created, few people had access to any part of a written Bible. They knew the gospel stories from hearing about them, from what they were taught about them, and from visual representations like this one.

That's not to say that they necessarily knew or understood less about stories like this than we do. Only that they accessed or experienced them in somewhat different ways.

Today, most people who study this story will either deem it a fantasy that no intelligent person could accept, determinedly defend it as 100 per cent literally true (because Jesus could do anything), or look for a rational explanation.

None of those points of view does justice to the highly symbolic nature of the story... but I think this old icon does. It was created to inspire devotion as well as teach; however, that wouldn't have been about information or knowledge – and certainly not about discussions or arguments over historical facts. It was about *meaning*, conveyed through the symbolic elements in the story and the picture.

Now, I should say that a lot of Biblical scholars from all over the theological spectrum warn that we should be careful about interpreting what we read in the Bible as having symbolic or allegorical or “hidden” meanings. Rightly so. We can end up losing the historical context or ignoring the writers’ intentions. It can be way too easy to say, for example, that Jesus didn’t really mean that thing about giving away your cloak *literally*. Looking for symbolic meaning can overcomplicate a straightforward message or close off other ways of reading a passage. It can suggest that the word is only for a select few to understand. So caution is warranted.

But then again, there are lots of places where the Biblical text itself clearly invites the reader to wonder about deeper meanings. This story is definitely one of those places. Just think about the resonance it has for us. Probably not more than a few of us have ever been out in a small boat on dangerous, choppy waters as a storm is blowing up. But we know what it is to feel afraid, lost, helpless, at the mercy of forces we can’t control. “The storms of life,” we say. Sometimes it feels like they just keep coming. We pray to God for some calm, some respite from the turmoil around us. The story of Jesus coming through the storm to meet his friends in their panic can really speak to us.

The mosaic icon is evidence that this story has always spoken to Christian believers not just about *Jesus’* life but about their lives. It contains a lot of symbolism that people of earlier times were familiar with and could “read” and draw meaning from. Most important to understanding the picture *and* the story is the boat. The boat represents the church. This metaphor goes back to the earliest years of the Christian church and Matthew almost certainly is intentional about using it here.

His gospel was written for a community of mostly-Jewish Christians, probably in the last quarter of the first century. The temple in Jerusalem and a lot of the city had been destroyed by the Romans, and at the same time the Christian movement was becoming more disconnected from its Jewish roots. There was a lot of turmoil and uncertainty about the future; the church feared hostility both from Rome and from leaders in the Jewish community. This story - the whole gospel of Matthew, in fact, and really the other gospels as well – is a word to the *church*. It’s about the life of the church, not just about Jesus’ life. It speaks to what the church Matthew knew was experiencing. And so of course it speaks of the church in any anxious time. It’s quite appropriate that the mosaic we’re looking at is located in a church.

Sometimes in art the boat that represents the church is an ark of safety and salvation. And at other times – like here – it is smaller and seems tippy and vulnerable. In the boat, ten disciples represent the people, or maybe the leaders, of the church. They seem... concerned. But I notice that none of them is actually attempting to row or steer the boat! The boat is surrounded by a sea of heavy waves; we easily equate that with danger or difficulty. Notice, though, that where Jesus is, the sea is calm! The message offers both understanding and acknowledgement of the fears and struggles ... and reassurance that no matter what we are facing, Jesus does not abandon the church.

We’ll come back to Jesus shortly but first let’s think for a minute about Peter, who’s also on the water with Jesus, both in the picture and in Matthew’s story. Only Matthew, of the four gospel

writers, tells this bit about Peter stepping out of the boat and walking across the water to meet Jesus... so we want to know why. The answer, I think, takes us back to Matthew's – and his community's – concern about their future.

Sometimes Peter is portrayed as kind of impetuous and hotheaded and not quite on board with what Jesus was doing. Remember that he wanted to build shrines to contain the mountaintop experience of Jesus' transfiguration, when Jesus knew they needed to come down from the mountain and get back to ministry? Remember how he said he'd follow Jesus to the death, and then when Jesus was arrested, denied that he even knew him? But Matthew portrays Peter more positively than the other gospels do. It's in Matthew's gospel that Jesus responds to Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah by saying "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." The *church* is Matthew's focus and so it makes sense that his story reflects Peter's key leadership role.

Maybe he's just trying to assure his community that the church's leadership is still strong, faithful, and courageous – even in the storm of chaos that surrounds them. However, it seems to me that even here Matthew is willing to admit that the reality is complicated. On the one hand, Peter shows extraordinary faith. Yes, maybe he's a little bit impetuous still, but he also is determined not to be timid or half-hearted in his commitment; he's all in. He senses that sometimes you have to get out of the boat, take a risk. Perhaps Matthew also thinks this is important for a leader.

But the story also points out that Peter *can't really* walk on water. (It's important to remember that, as much as we joke about how nice it would be, *of course* our leaders can't walk on water or meet other similarly unreasonable expectations we might have of them. What we should be looking for instead is leaders who have faith and courage.) Matthew says that Peter "noticed the wind," which seems odd. Didn't he already know it was stormy? The implication, I guess, is that he realized just how fierce the storm was. It turns out that his faith isn't enough, or isn't unwavering enough, to hold him up for long. Whose is? we might ask. But Jesus is there. Jesus catches him, lifts him up and says, "why did you doubt?" Which is, we can assume, what Matthew is saying to his people, "why do you doubt that Jesus will see us through this latest storm? why do you doubt that Jesus will sustain your leaders? why do you doubt that Jesus is more powerful than the chaos around you?"

Those questions are still relevant. In a time when the church is facing so many challenges, near-constant change, grief over losses; when much of the church seems to have opted for a decidedly un-Jesus-like vision and we have to decide what we're going to stand for; when we fear what the chaos around us will bring and we wonder about our own courage; when we face hostility from some and indifference from many... not to mention the folks who keep telling us that the church is dying... maybe "why do you doubt?" seems like a silly question. Maybe "why believe?" seems more appropriate. But part of this story's point is to offer perspective; we are not the first generation of the church to fear that we might be the last. What if we were to carry this image in our minds as a reminder of that? As a visual of the question, "why do you doubt?"

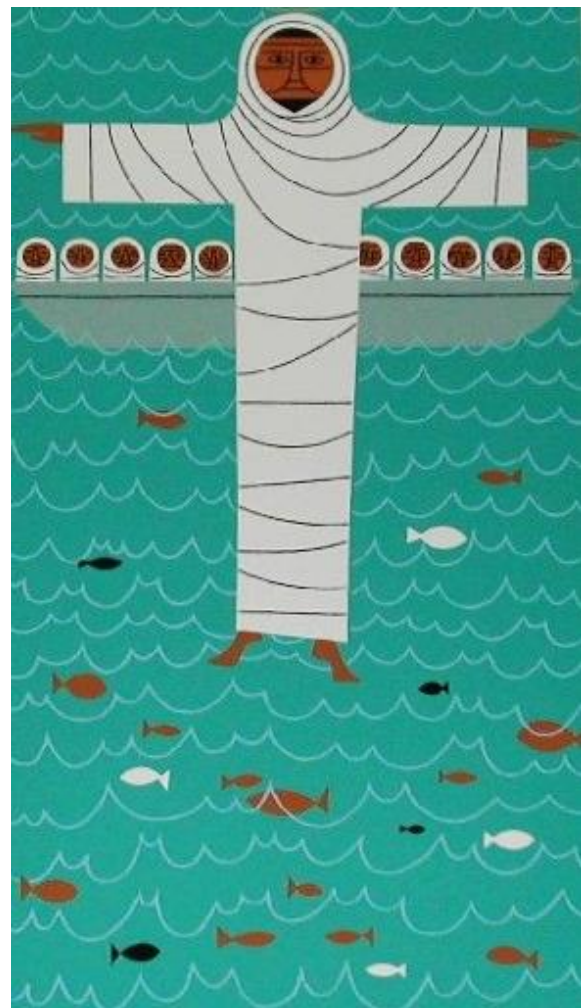
Look at it again. Note that Jesus is the largest, the dominant figure. Beneath his feet the waves diminish. With one strong hand he effortlessly lifts Peter up. In his other hand is a scroll representing the word, the gospel that Peter and the rest of the church will be sent out to share with the world. Behind Jesus and Peter, the boat is stable, despite the storm. And just in case anyone is not clear about the nature of Jesus' power ... the halo behind his head indicates that he comes with divine power and embodies the presence of God. The halo also has a cross design in it. Jesus' power to save and accompany his disciples through the storm flows through the cross. Look at the boat; its mast is also in the form of a cross – the shape and definition of the self-giving love the church must hold up and navigate by.

Matthew's story poses some big questions for us to think about: what does it mean to have faith? what does it mean to be the church? what does leadership look like? how do we experience the presence of Christ. I like this icon because it seems to reflect those questions. I think we need that.

I want us to look at another image of Jesus walking on the sea – something very different. This one is from 1979 and is by Edie Harper, an American artist, primarily a printmaker, who is known for work that has a bit of whimsy and humor in it. That's true even of her pictures of Biblical subjects, which is a bit unusual and I think would probably not have been seen – or accepted - much before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The title of this piece is "WOW!" which of course stands for "Walking on Water."

It's really simple, minimalist. Everything depicted with simple lines and just a few colors. The disciples are little more than faces peering over the side of the boat. They look a bit dumbfounded to me, but I can't really tell. Nothing distinguishes them one from the other. The whole background is sea, nothing but sea and waves and fish. And the figure of Jesus reigns over it all.

What I love about this picture is its playfulness and the way that playfulness invites us just to simply drink in the story and say, "wow!"



Maybe I can't explain it. Maybe I can't say whether I think it could have happened just this way or not. Maybe I can't discern exactly what it means for me, my life, the church, or the world at this moment. But what a story! And Jesus is there. Jesus is with us. Jesus is strength. Jesus is amazing. Wow!

I think we need that perspective on the story, too.

You can't help but notice that the figure of Jesus is in the shape of a cross. There's no wordy and detailed theology here. No explanation for how exactly the cross mediates Jesus' saving and sustaining power to his disciples. But this picture, like the mosaic icon (and like the gospel itself) looks at this story about the boat in the storm through the lens of the cross. To me, it feels like Jesus' presence with the disciples in this storm (and with the church in all the storms) is very much akin to the cross, where we see Jesus share fully in human suffering, embrace it with outstretched arms. Here, it almost looks like it's his arms holding the boat steady on the waves.

Edie Harper's commentary on her picture is interesting. She wrote, "WOW! Walking on water! The disciples couldn't believe it. But He did. And they did."

Once again, we are reminded that this is a story for the church – it's presence and promise and encouragement.

Here we don't see Peter getting out of the boat, floundering, being held up by Jesus. In fact, we can't tell *where* Peter is. What we do see, instead, is Jesus, not looking at Peter, but looking at *us*. Perhaps we are Peter in the water, in this picture, with Jesus ready to embrace us and lift us up. Wow! Amen.