

"JESUS AND PETER ON THE SEA"

Matthew 14:22-36

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I have sometimes mentioned that each of the gospels gives us a different picture of Jesus. In Mark, Jesus is all about discipleship. In Luke, he's an advocate for the poor and oppressed. In John, he's majestic. And in Matthew he is the new Moses. Comparing the Jesus of the various gospels can be fun and enlightening, but I've rarely thought to do this with the other characters.

Peter, for instance, appears as the bold, brash figure that we are used to. He's the one who speaks up and first proclaims Jesus as the Messiah. He's the one who promises to never leave Jesus' side no matter what. And in this story he is the one who demands that Jesus prove his identity with a test. He's the one who wants to do what Jesus is doing: walking on the water. And as we have come to expect, he's the one who sinks, whose boast is bigger than his actions.

At first glance, the Peter of Matthew's Gospel seems just like the Peter of Mark's. But Mark doesn't tell this part of the story. As in Matthew, Mark tells us about the feeding of the 5000 after which he puts the disciples in a boat, dismisses the crowd and goes off to pray. Both gospels then go on to talk about the storm that comes up, about Jesus approaching them across the sea, about them thinking that he's some sort of ghost. But then, after they've established his identity, Mark has him get in the boat and immediately the sea becomes calm. The exchange with Peter is left out or rather added in Matthew.

In Mark, the trouble on the sea is told to emphasize once again the inability of the disciples to understand Jesus. The story ends with the comment that they didn't understand about the loaves and their hearts were hardened. In Mark, this is all the disciples, the male disciples that is. Peter is included.

But Matthew changes that. It's no longer about their inability to understand. It's suddenly all about Peter and this exchange with Jesus. I loved this story as a child. Peter seems so human. At first he's afraid, as I would have been. He's afraid of the waves and the wind and the ghostly presence on the sea. But then he gets his feet under him, adopts the courage of the fearless toddler who's seen too many superheroes on TV. "Command me to come to you on the water." Like a parent who knows the limitations of the child and is prepared to step in, Jesus tells him to go ahead. And so he does and he succeeds... until fear suddenly returns, and Jesus rescues him.

When I first heard this story as a child, I'm sure I heard it as just one more example of Peter's impulsive activity that lands him in trouble yet again. But the portrait, if you read closely is so much more complex than that. We have few stories in the New Testament

that flesh out a character in this kind of detail. What was a static portrayal of the disciples' failure to understand in Mark's gospel becomes an intimate encounter between Jesus and Peter, the disciples practically forgotten in the background.

But we're so used to the impulsive Peter that we miss some details and misunderstand others. We miss Peter's initial fear and caution. We misunderstand the conversation that calls him out of the boat. We miss his initial success. And we misunderstand Jesus' comment about having little faith.

When Jesus says to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" we hear Jesus criticizing Peter as though he had no faith at all. Liz Barrington Forney, writing in *Feasting on the Gospels* believes that Jesus' words are more like "friendly jesting" and hold out "radical possibility" (p.19). No one else overcomes their fear and talks to what they believe is a specter. No one else sees the miracle in what Jesus is doing. No one else steps out of the boat. Peter is not the bumbling fool we take him for in this story. Among all the disciples, he is the only one with any faith. Jesus isn't saying that he failed. Rather, with a smile on his face, he tells Peter that it could have been so much more, and I think, by implication, he's saying it will be much more. This story is actually intended to confirm Jesus' earlier words to Peter: "Upon this rock, I will build my church."

But Peter didn't come to this naturally. Like the other disciples, he's afraid of the storm and he mistakes Jesus for some apparition. Forney writes: "It seems to be a central aspect of the human experience that our fears and superstitions blind us to the arrival of the holy" (p.17).

We all start here, crossing the sea when a storm arises. The sea in scripture is a place of chaos, of danger, of uncontrolled forces, but it is also the place of encounter. The Israelites cross the Red Sea in miraculous fashion as they escape Pharaoh's army. Joshua crosses the Jordan River in similar fashion as the people enter the Promised Land. Jonah encounters God on the sea through which he had hoped to escape his responsibilities for Nineveh. And the Spirit of God hovers over the sea and from it brings order to creation.

Again Forney writes: "The wind blows the boat, the disciples are far off shore, and night begins to fall. As readers, we are invited into the liminal spaces of night and day, sand and shore, wind and calm. We are in an in-between space, where the human and the holy will meet to stretch and encounter one another" (p. 15).

So here we are on a Sunday morning gathered together in the boat attempting to ride out the storms that surround us. There are forces that would divide us: the winds of racism, sexism, homophobia; forces that would turn neighbors into enemies. There are forces that would overcome us: the lust for power and material gain; forces that would pit nation against nation, the rich against the poor, and profit against the health of the earth.

We come here to be refreshed, encouraged, built up, but a boat is no place to escape the storm. The encouragement we take is not the promise of safety, but the call of faith, even if only a little faith.

Jesus is here offering us spiritual nourishment, feeding us as he fed the 5000 with what seemed like so little. But he is also out there walking the stormy seas, calling out to us, calling us to step out of the boat, to walk the seas with him. Even if, we walk but a step or two, as Peter did, the radical possibilities are there.

Not every day is stormy. Not every sea crossing is filled with terror. But sometime the call may come and we'll have to step out of the boat. And if we want to be like the one without regrets on that day, we'll do as Peter and walk on water. As short-lived as it was, what a thrill it must have seemed. Amen.

Liz Barrington Forney in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 2* Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY, 2013