

Proper 14 A

August 13, 2017

Walking with Jesus

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Enoch did it. Noah did it; even before he made the ark. Abraham and Sarah both did it, too. Of course, Adam and Eve were the first ones to do it, they did it in the cool of the evening, in the garden, and they weren't wearing any clothes when they did it.

So what did all these figures from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, do? What activity did they all share in common?

They all walked with God. Among all the men and women in Genesis, these were specifically mentioned as people who walked with God. They aren't the only ones, if you were to peruse the Bible, you would see it chock full of walks, of people taking a walk God called them to take, like Abraham and Sarah, such as when Joshua walked around those walls of Jericho. The book Exodus, which we will be reading together with other Episcopalians in our diocese this fall, is about a very long walk, a walk that started with God's people following God out of Egypt and into the wilderness where they walked until they were ready to enter the land God promised them.

The term "walk with God" is one of those rich, theological terms scholars and theologians tell us indicates a life dedicated to following God wherever God calls and leads us, even if it is to unknown places or potentially frightening places. And perhaps there is a little more to it, just as there is with any walk.

Walking *with* someone is different than following in their footsteps or leading them. If you have ever taken a walk with someone, you might be able to relate. If you intend to walk with a person who is in better physical shape than you are, then you either have to work harder to keep up, or the other person has to ease up so you can stay together. When my husband and I take walks sometimes, not very often, I have to remind him his legs are longer than mine, or our dog has arthritis in one leg, and we adjust our pace so we can walk together. Walking together involves knowing each other, knowing each other's limitations, respecting preferences and wishes, especially when it comes to deciding which way to go. Walking together doesn't have to be a practical way to get from here to there; it can be a way to get to know another person better, and it can also be a pleasant way to just to enjoy each other's company.

In her book *Walking on Water, Reflections on Faith and Art*, award winning novelist, writer and Episcopalian Madeleine L'engle builds on what it means to walk with Christ when she wrote part of the purpose of being a Christian is to see Christ and know Christ when we see him, especially when we see Christ in the world. L'engle's words can be very helpful as we look at another walk in the Bible, the story of Jesus and Peter walking on water in our Gospel today.

There are many ways to interpret this story, perhaps one reason why is that it is loaded with Old Testament images, like water. In the Bible, water was both necessary for life, and could also symbolize chaos, life without God, something people could not control. Back when God created the world, it was God who put the chaos of water under control. When the Israelites were crossing the Red Sea, it was God who cleared a path through the water so they could walk through. So Jesus walking on the water is a way to show who Jesus is, as only God could have such control over stormy, chaotic waters.

Yet, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they didn't feel comforted or relieved to see him. They weren't even concerned for his welfare. Did you notice how they responded to seeing Jesus walk on water? They didn't even know it was him. They thought he was a ghost.

Let's take a moment and let that sink in, no pun intended. The disciples, the men Jesus had called to follow him, to come with him, who had been with him a good long while when this story took place in Matthew's Gospel, who had seen those feeding miracles and healing miracles, didn't recognize or know it was Jesus when they saw him. Maybe it was dark. Maybe he was glowing. Maybe they were tired. Maybe the waves obscured their view. Maybe there was a good, practical excuse. But the author of the Gospel didn't mention one, instead the author wrote when the disciples saw Jesus, they didn't know it was him, and they were afraid. Ironically, it wasn't the storm that frightened the disciples in Matthew's version of this story, it was Jesus himself walking on the water and not knowing who it was, that is what terrified them.

Hearing their cries of fear, Jesus called out to them. At first glance his words, "Take heart, it is I, don't be afraid." Might just sound comforting. But they are also deeply theological. The term in the middle, translated "it is I" can also be translated, I AM, which is how God has spoken of God's self, such as when God told Moses, I AM who I AM. That powerful term is sandwiched between two other phrases that are the most commonly delivered message of the Bible: the message to not be afraid. In short, Jesus told his disciples twice not to be afraid, and once who he is.

Only one disciple responded to those words; only one showed how Jesus' words had given him the courage to jump out of the boat and start water walking. Except, that isn't really what happened.

Peter often gets a lot of criticism from scholars, commentators, and preachers for his actions in this story. From being faulted for taking his eyes off Jesus, to leaving the safety of the boat and his community in the first place, to trying to hog the theological spot light, many people have focused on Peter's failed attempts at walking on water and accuse him of trying to do something he wasn't ready for or shouldn't have tried. Except, Peter didn't just jump out of the boat when he heard Jesus' voice, at least not in this story. Instead, he asked Jesus to call him to come out on the water with him.

I read one scholar who said Peter's request was wrong, it was a temptation, like those of Satan in the wilderness, and that is why Peter failed. However, I don't believe that to be true because if it had been a temptation, I don't believe Jesus would have responded the way he did. One of the things we see about Jesus in the Gospels is Jesus was excellent at telling Satan "No." If Peter's request to walk on the water had been wrong, I believe Jesus would have told him no. Instead, Jesus called Peter to come to him on the waves like Jesus called Peter at the start of the Gospel to put down his fishing nets and follow him. Perhaps that is how Peter knew it was Jesus.

And Peter got out of the boat. And Peter walked on the water. Too often I believe this part of the story gets rushed over. I believe it is important to notice Peter did walk on water. Peter didn't back out when Jesus called him, he didn't ask another disciple to try it first, he did not say he was just joking around, he did as Jesus commanded, and he found himself doing the impossible, he found himself walking on the water, walking toward Jesus. He did not do it himself, only with Jesus' help did he find himself walking the impossible walk with Jesus, to Jesus, because of who Jesus is. One can only imagine what that must have been like.

But maybe it doesn't have to be hard for us to imagine; maybe any one of us who feel we've answered a call from God, whether it was to ordained ministry, to start a new ministry, or go where God called us, whether it was to a church, to a certain college or university, to start a new relationship, we might be able to imagine what it was like for Peter to walk on the water. In walking on the water, he may have gotten to know and trust Jesus better, which often happens when any of us answer a call from God.

Of course, the part of this story most people seem to emphasize is the part where Peter noticed the waves and the wind and started to sink and he called out for Jesus to save him. Again, many well-meaning folks like to criticize Peter for wanting to water walk and then failing, but maybe Peter didn't really fail. Perhaps Peter was just in a place so many of us might find ourselves in from time to time, caught, as retired bishop of Durham and theologian N. T. Wright writes, "between glory and terror." Perhaps Peter was in that place a lot of us find ourselves in when we start out feeling great about what God has called us to only to discover not everyone feels so good about what we are doing. And the criticism starts, or the rejection, or the unforeseen challenges like money shortages, lack of volunteer support, changes in health, job loss or the betrayal of a friend or family member. There are any number of things that can feel like a storm. What I admire about Peter in this story is he didn't turn around and try to get back to the boat by himself, he didn't blame Jesus or the wind or the disciples for his sinking. Instead he showed he was still walking with Jesus, even if he wasn't on the surface of the water, because he asked Jesus to save him.

To me, this powerful story is about walking with Jesus, the Son of God, about answering God's call, which sometimes means leaving a place of comfort even if that place of comfort is already being rocked by the uncontrollable things in the world and to go out into those uncontrolled elements, not because we think we can do it on our own, but because that is where God is calling us to go. To me, this powerful story isn't about success or failure, it isn't about sinking or swimming, it is about walking, step by step, moment by moment, with God; discovering, with each step, more about God's love for us and purpose for us. It's about getting to know God better, as God revealed God's self in Jesus, and learning to see each other as God sees us.

The story ends with terror transformed into worship. For some, the idea of worshipping God makes them uncomfortable, as if worshipping God or Jesus makes God a narcissist desperate for our praise. But we need to remember, we are made in God's image, not the other way around. Worshiping God is not about making God feel good; it is how we show gratitude and praise, it is one way we participate with the Creator, it is part of how we walk with God, how we recognize God active in the word around us, even when it is storming.

So while only one disciple got out of the boat and walked on water, that walker walking might be how the other disciples recognized Jesus and who he is. That may be the moment they realized they weren't following an earthy hero, a political leader or war hero. By accepting Jesus call to follow him, they were walking the walk other Biblical figures had walked before them, and we are called to walk today, the walk

with God. It's not a walk of prestige or power, often it can lead to those places between glory and terror, and yet each step can lead us deeper into God's heart, God's dream, for all the world.

So, whether we are barefoot like Adam and Eve, wearing water shoes like Peter, or boots like Joshua, you don't have to be a hero to walk with God, just someone willing to get to know God better, each step of the way, wherever God calls us to walk.