

**Sermon For Pentecost 9, Proper 12B**  
**Church of the Ascension, Chicago**  
**Rev. Dr. Robert Petite, Assisting Priest.**

I have many memories from my childhood associated with water. While I have many good memories of times at the seaside, I also have memories connected water that are frightening.

One of my vivid childhood memories is standing on the wharf in my Newfoundland outpost home, watching my father sail out to sea during a raging storm. The memory of my father standing on the open deck of a fishing schooner moving out to sea, is a deeply rooted childhood memory. Would he come back to us, I wondered?

Years later, but again as a child, I remember watching the Disney film Fantasia. The segment that completely captured my imagination was the episode about the Sorcerer's Apprentice, set to the memorable music of Paul Dukas, and conducted by Stokowski.

I was scared out of my wits as I watched Mickey's using the Sorcerer's magical powers and creating a huge delude that overwhelmed everything in its path. Mickey created a watery chaos, that was finally subdued by the Sorcerer himself. I can still see the Sorcerer's angry countenance as he grabbed the magic wand and a watery broom from Mickey's trembling hands.

These are powerful stories in a young child's life and quite naturally point to raging water as a symbol of chaos and fear.

The connection between water and chaos is one of the Scriptures most expressive symbols, and often refers to God's enduring ability to bring order out of the chaos, and a profound epiphany of the power of God's calming and ordering presence.

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Genesis 1:1*

This passage from the book of Genesis is a beautifully poetic representation of the chaos that existed in the universe before the Spirit of God began to order it.

The chaos is represented in this text through the symbols of darkness, formlessness, and of course water. Water is a potent symbol for life and for death, a reality ritually represented in our Christian initiation rites. In baptism we drown to our old selves and re-emerge, reborn as a new creature through our incorporation into the risen life of Christ.

These stories from scripture, and their representation in our Liturgy, are helpful reference points from which to begin exploring the meaning of today's story from the Gospel of Mark, that has the symbol of a raging sea at its center.

The familiar story of Jesus walking on the water has been the brunt of many jokes. So, let me begin our exploration of this miracle, by simply laying out the story once more.

Jesus has just fed five thousand people with loaves and fishes in the desert, a place of emptiness. Following the feeding Jesus dismisses the crowd, sends his disciples off in a boat, and he remains behind to pray. From the shoreline, he begins to notice that his disciples are struggling against an “adverse wind”, and so he makes his way toward them, not in another boat, but by walking on the raging sea. When the disciples notice him, they cry out in fear. He immediately calls out to them: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." He then gets into the boat and the wind immediately ceases.

The disciples are amazed at these events, because, as Mark suggests, “they did not understand the meaning of the loaves, and because their hearts were hardened”. That’s the story in a nutshell.

The story also occurs in Matthew and Luke and like Mark, always follows the feeding of the five thousand. But in Matthew (14:22-36), the story also includes Peter stepping out onto the water to make his way toward Jesus. (Pause)

What meaning are we, as people of faith, to make of these miracle stories? And how does that meaning relate to the experience of chaos so often associated with water in the Scriptures as a whole?

I would like to begin, as I often do where the Scripture is concerned, by suggesting we use our imaginations. A wonderful place to begin is by paying particular attention to a comment made by Bishop Michael Curry, our very own Presiding Bishop.

*“Before you march,” he says, “before you preach, before you meet, before you go out as witnesses in this world: Meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus, Focus on him. Fixate on him. And you will walk on water.”*

What on earth he has in mind as he encourages us to focus on Jesus in such a way as to result in our ability to walk on water.

Is he suggesting that we literally walk on water? I think not. So, if this is not his meaning, what does he have in mind I wonder?

Bishop Curry is suggesting that we take our focus off the miracles for a moment, just for a moment, off of the feeding of the five thousand, and the walking on the water, and simply focus on Jesus himself.

Perhaps it is often your experience, like mine, that the times when Jesus most comes to me, or is most present to me, is during the storms that occupy my life. Perhaps it is the words of God to Isaiah, that speak directly to your own experience: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you” ([Isaiah 43:2](#)). It has been my experience that it is in the difficult experiences of life, illness, loss, and all kinds of hardship, that has brought Jesus closer to me, that has brought him more in focus for me.

Some of you may remember that in the same miracle story from Matthew, that it was precisely when Peter took his focus off Jesus and began focusing on his own effort to walk on the water, that he began to sink, and fall into the chaos of the deep. (Pause)

If we, in our time, are committed to receiving the miracle story as a resource for our own spiritual journey, we will need to engage the story as much through its symbols, as through the miracle itself. The focus for us, as it was indeed for Mark, is not only the miracle, but also what the miracle is proclaiming.

I'm not suggesting, not even for a moment, that there was no miracle for the disciples nor for Mark. Nor do I want to explain away the miracles in rationalistic terms.

As we contemplate the miracles in Scripture, we are certainly invited to take them seriously. The people of Jesus time, and in the time of the Gospel writers themselves, believed in miracles, and experienced miracles. They were a common experience for people of faith in the Christian community. But the proclamation of these miracles in the community of Jesus, and in Mark's own community, also contained significant symbolic meaning.

Those who read the Gospel of Mark, and this story, learn that Jesus is someone who is able to chart the dangerous waters of the spirit, to navigate the chaos of human life and bring human life under his care and peace.

The boat that the disciples find themselves in this morning, as the sea rages around them, is finally experienced as a safe vessel for getting to the other side, - when Jesus is in the boat with them.

His presence has the capacity to quell the storm that so often rages around and inside us.

Do we not refer to the main body of this church, that part of the Church building where the people worship, as the nave, as in the navy, or the boat that will carry us through this life and on to the other side.

Perhaps the walking on water that Bishop Curry invites us into has something to do with adopting a willingness to trust, and to enclose ourselves into the buoyant safety of Jesus as we reach out amid our trials and tribulations.

And what about the disciples misunderstanding of the feeding of the five thousand and the hardening of their hearts? The misunderstanding may have to do with just that ability, the ability to trust, and live into the abundance of life that Jesus offers us, an abundance that overcomes the emptiness of the desert place "*I have come that you may have life, and that you may have it abundantly*". (John 10:10.)

One way for our own hearts to harden is to move away from trusting that God will provide what is needed for the healing of our lives, our souls, and bodies. Without living in that trust, we may experience ourselves sinking into the deep, rather than walking on the water, as we encounter the chaos that life often presents us.

Walking on water is all about trusting in Jesus and tethering ourselves to that life. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Take the risk of stepping out into life, into its raging and storm filled times, in trust that all things will be well.

The invitation is simply to trust and step out unto the water, as the poet Ellen Kort invites us.

*You know how it is sometimes  
when you look out on the water . . .  
I've always wanted to try it  
so I simply stepped out off the dock . . .*

*. . . it wasn't like parting  
the Red Sea or anything  
I think it was just a matter of wanting  
to do it*

*putting one foot  
in front of the other and going.*