

FAITH AND DOUBT
MATTHEW 14: 22-33

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University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

In a biography of the greatest novelist America has ever produced, William Faulkner, Jay Parini tells about a dinner party in Princeton, New Jersey in 1953. Faulkner “met the wild-eyed, wild-haired Albert Einstein and his sister, who were living in Princeton at this time. Faulkner was horribly shy but deeply impressed by Einstein’s kindly, soft-spoken manner. ‘Where do you get your stories?’ Einstein wondered. ‘I hear voices.’ Faulkner said. Einstein nodded, with a slight smile, having understood.”

Several striking images occur in Matthew’s depiction of Jesus walking on the water, among them that his voice is heard above the waves and the terror of the disciples. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” This story is found in three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark and John—but Matthew provides by far the fullest account. The care with which the story is told, from the its initial setting as they get into the boat and Jesus goes off alone to pray to Peter’s walking on the water to meet Jesus, is rich in details.

We hear the voice of Jesus calling to us above the tumult of the twenty-first century, don’t we? Every time we hear voices speaking to us, the voices of long-deceased grandparents and great-grandparents, of those physically absent but spiritually present who give their blessing and encouragement. Voices speak to us in silent but powerful ways at every critical juncture of our lives.

When the African-American poet and novelist, Alice Walker, was still virtually unknown, just a young black woman in Tallahassee, Florida trying to learn her craft, the pastor of the all-white First Presbyterian Church in that city invited her to give a reading on Martin Luther King’s birthday. Ms. Walker stood in the chancel of the church, looked up at the balcony which had originally served as a slave gallery, and said, “I see ghosts up there in that gallery. I see little black women in their kerchiefs and long dresses, and I see wizened old African men in their only black suits, white shirts and string ties. They are smiling on us tonight. They are giving a blessing to whatever understanding and progress we may be trying to make.”

We discover that Jesus amid the pressure of his ministry finds the time and place to pray. He makes deliberate plans to escape both the disciples and the crowds in order to be alone (14:2-23). But as he is listening for the voice of God, the narrator juxtaposes the situation of the disciples, struggling through the night against a stormy sea. We are confronted with a split-screen image that is filled with realism: Jesus is praying and the disciples are struggling.

The comforting words of Jesus are spoken to the frightened disciples, who are terrified by the figure coming to them on the sea: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (v. 27). The whole Gospel is wrapped up in that assurance, isn’t it? Matthew is not concerned about merely reporting historical facts; he is interpreting these events.

Jesus has come to fulfill God's promises. It's that simple. Matthew does not psychologize the experience. He does not speculate what went on in the mind of Our Lord. He does not encourage us to raise questions about whether Jesus knew he was the Son of God or had some unique relation to God or whether Jesus' walking on water was unusual or mysterious or miraculous. It was what it was. As Fred Craddock has said, "That is the stuff of novels, not of Gospels." The Church has always lived with the supreme paradox about Jesus: he was both fully human and fully divine. At the same time. Not three-quarters human and one-quarter divine. Not mostly divine and only partly human.

At the end of the story, there is the response of the disciples, who have watched and listened to all that has taken place and can do nothing but worship and confess Jesus as the Son of God. But the heart of the incident for Matthew is the interchange between Jesus and Peter and his walking, then sinking, then being rescued.

"Lord," Peter shouts above the thunder, lightning and waves, "if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (v. 28). There is uncertainty in Peter's voice—"if it is you"—but what is most striking is the recognition that this extraordinary request has no validity apart from obedience to the command of Jesus.

So, when the command is spoken, Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk toward Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has offered a penetrating analysis about Peter:

Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life to the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith... The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if [people] imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.

Friends, we must pay attention to that business about obedience. That's not a word we like to hear. We twenty-first century, sophisticated, well-educated folks know what's right and wrong. We don't like to talk in terms of black and white; we deal in shades of gray. We're logical, reasonable people. We read our Bibles through enlightenment eyes (if we read the Bible at all), so we don't want to be told about commandments and duties and things we have to do.

Why do you think Rick Warren's two books, *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Purpose Driven Life* have been so extremely popular, selling millions of copies and studied by so many Christians? The answer is obvious and simple: most individuals like most churches function mostly on automatic pilot. We live with so little direction in our lives, so little motivating, energizing purpose. And we know it. Churches keep doing the same things the same way year after year, then wonder why new people are not attracted to their congregations. Same way with most of us: we get up, go to work, earn our money, do what's necessary, come home and watch that instrument which has shot a hole in the brain of the American public.

If following Jesus means anything, it means purpose, new direction, following a new path. That's what repentance means—not just saying you are sorry for your sins. It means turning around and taking a new path.

Bonhoeffer goes on to draw the theological paradox that emerges from this scene: only the one who believes is obedient, and only the one who is obedient believes. "Faith is only real where there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience." Had Peter remained in the boat and not taken the first step, his faith would have been worthless.

A businessman notorious for his ruthlessness once announced to Mark Twain: "Before I die, I intend to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud at the top."

"I have a better idea," said Twain. You could stay home in Boston and keep them."

Believing is not a matter of being smart or having the right creed. It is about obedience to God's will. It is about receiving God's Holy Spirit which changes us. It is about facing who we are and whose we are.

Malcolm Muggeridge was for many years a major opponent of Christianity. He was a British television personality; very forceful, very certain that the whole business of faith was a fraud. Then, in middle age he made a major turnabout—or, rather, God turned him around. He became a Christian, answered God's call and was baptized. He wrote about becoming a Christian: "I may, I suppose regard myself, or pass for being, a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets—that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of Internal Revenue—that's success.

"Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions—that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time—that's fulfillment.

"Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing—less than nothing, a positive impediment—measured against one drop of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are. What, I ask myself, does life hold, what is there in the works of time, in the past, now and to come, which could possibly be put in the balanced against the refreshment of drinking that water?"

The physicist Leo Szilard once announced to his friend Hans Bethe that he was thinking of keeping a diary: "I don't intend to publish it," he said. "I am merely going to record the facts for the information of God."

"Don't you think," Bethe asked, "that God knows the facts?" "Yes," said Szilard, "He knows the facts, but He does not know this version of the facts."

There is more than “the facts.” Facts are not enough and our version of them is skewed.

Near the end of his life, someone asked Albert Outler what he had learned over all his years of preaching, writing and teaching. “Early in my ministry, I would tell people, ‘You’ve got to love. You’ve got to love. You’ve got to love.’ Now I have grown to realize that ‘You get to love. You get to love.’”

Consider again the paradoxes with which Bonhoeffer confronts us as he wrote from his prison cell in 1945: “It is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ; it is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one can believe in the resurrection and a new world; it is only when one submits to God’s law that one can speak of grace; and it is only when God’s wrath and vengeance are hanging as grim realities over the heads of one’s enemies that something of what it means to love and forgive them can touch our hearts.”

God interrupts our neat little categories, our denials and evasions when we are called out of our comfortable little boats. God keeps putting before us the choice between life as it is and life as it can be. Not between good and evil so much as between the good and the best. We get to love. We get to love all of God’s children. Because we are unconditionally, faithfully loved by the One whose Spirit fills us.