

***Getting out of the Boat***  
**A Sermon on Matthew 14:22-36**  
**Proper 14**  
**August 9, 2020**

**Introduction**

The story of walking on water, like the story of the feeding of the 5,000, is an epiphany. The Greek word ἐπιφάνεια means to appear, to give off brilliant light, An epiphany is an appearance by a god. The point that the gospel writer is trying to make is that God is working through Jesus. Jesus does things that only God can do. The feeding of the 5,000 reenacts the miracle of the manna in the wilderness. It is an epiphany of God as creator. Walking on water demonstrates the power of God over the forces of chaos. It is an epiphany of God as all-powerful.

These two stories fit nicely together. They are two of the most-beloved stories in the Gospels. They are sometimes described as nature miracles, but they are more than that. They show that God is uniquely present in Jesus. These stories would be perfectly appropriate in the season of Epiphany, but the tradition has reserved that time for the appearance to the wise men and the turning of water into wine at Cana.

Today we get a better understanding of what it means to Matthew to say that God is with us in the person of Jesus.

**First Move: An Epiphany at Sea**

For the first time in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus sends the disciples away without him. After the disciples gather the leftovers in the 12 baskets from the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus presses them to get into a boat and go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus remains behind and dismisses the crowds.

Then Jesus goes up the mountain by himself to pray. This is the first time in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus is shown as praying. He had given the disciples instructions on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. He told them to pray in secret to their father. Jesus now embodies that command. He is alone in the dark on a mountain. Mountains are a place of epiphany in the Old Testament. It is the place on earth where people are closest to God, who was thought to live in the heavens, just where the sky touched the mountains. Jesus will soon show the power of God, but first he prays in dependence on God.

The boat carrying the disciples is now many stadia from the shore. A stadium is a Roman unit of measurement; it is equal to 1/8 mile. The gospel writer overwhelms us with images of chaos and uncontrollable power. The boat is being tortured by the wind. It is the darkness part of the night, the fourth watch, between 3 and 6 a.m. The boat is in the middle of the sea, one of the elemental forces of chaos.

In the midst of this chaos, the disciples see Jesus walking toward them upon the sea. Walking on the sea is something that only the gods can do in ancient literature. The disciples beheld Jesus. To behold is to look upon something with wonder or surprise. Behold is a favorite expression that the gospel writers use to call attention to something unusual. The NRSV always takes it out; I always leave it in my translations. The disciples thought the figure approaching them was an apparition. An apparition is something that appears to be something it cannot be. In this case, it is someone you see or think you see, but they are not really there. The disciples are afraid; it looks like Jesus, but Jesus could not be walking on the water.

The disciples cry out in fear. Fear is a universal reaction in Biblical times when people are confronted with an epiphany. The power of God is too awesome to behold.

Jesus speaks to them. "Have courage. It is I; do not be afraid." "It is I" could also be translated as "I am." It is the same expression that God uses in speaking to Moses at the burning bush. The gospel writer probably intends for the listeners to keep both meanings in mind: "It is I" and "I am." This does not mean that Jesus is God; it means that the divine presence is mediated through Jesus.

Peter is the only one of the disciples to respond to Jesus. He gives an ambiguous response. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come toward you upon the waters." This could be seen as testing God. It reminds of what the devil said during the Temptation, "If you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread." Also, Peter could be asking to share in the divine power to walk on water. I have a more favorable view of Peter. He is not sure it is Jesus: "Lord, if it is you." Peter has faith that Jesus will protect him.

Jesus gives a one-word command, "Come." Peter trusts Jesus, and climbs out of the boat in the middle of the sea in the middle of the night in the middle of a strong wind. That is a lot of trust. Jesus does not disappoint. Peter starts walking on the waters toward Jesus. This shows that Jesus not only has the power to walk on the sea, he has the ability to share that power with others.

Then Peter makes the mistake of looking around. He notices the strong wind and is afraid of it. He begins to sink. To Peter's credit, he cries out, "Lord, save me."

Jesus immediately takes hold of Peter. He reproaches him, "One of little faith, why did you doubt?" It could also be translated, "Why did you hesitate?"

They both climb into the boat, and the wind stops. Jesus has stilled another storm.

We can criticize Peter as having little faith, but he is the only one who got out of the boat. Peter's trust has an effect on the whole community. The disciples recognize that they have just seen the power of God at work. They kneel down before Jesus in the boat and say, "Truly you are God's son."

When they land, the people recognize Jesus and bring the sick from all over the region. They ask Jesus to let them touch the hem of his cloak. This refers to the tassels worn by observant Jews. Jesus is depicted as an observant Jew, obedient to Torah. As many as he touched were brought safely through.

We have the elements of worship in the two epiphany stories: a Eucharistic meal, praying, twice (Jesus on the mountain and Peter's cry, "Lord, save me"), and confession of faith ("truly you are God's son").

## **Second Move: Jesus Gets Us Through the Storms**

We are in the midst of storms right now. They seem to be overwhelming us.

We are being battered by a health crisis. We don't know when or if it will end. We can't risk touching people. We don't know how life will be changed when the virus subsides.

We are being battered by a justice crisis that has been going on for 400 years. Black lives still seem to matter less than white lives. Did you see the images this week of four black girls in Aurora, Colorado who went to a salon to get their nails done? The police pulled up behind their car in the parking lot and drew their guns. They handcuffed the girls, ages 17, 14, 12 and 6, and put them face down on the asphalt. The girls are crying. The police thought the girls were in a stolen car. When they called in to check the license plates, it turns out that it was a motorcycle that had been stolen, not a car. How are four girls such a threat that they need to be handcuffed and placed face down on the asphalt? What memories do you think that the 6-year-old and 12-year-old will carry of this episode? Can you imagine the police doing this to four white girls in Edmond?

Churches are being battered by an attendance crisis that has been going on for 40 years. Mainline churches are closing. Attendance is shrinking. And now big churches cannot even meet for worship because there are too many people to observe social distancing.

The center of this story is: "Have courage. It is I; do not be afraid." Those words are just as true for the crises we face today: Jesus doesn't promise us that there will be no storms. He promises instead that he will help get us through the storms.

Peter shows us what we are capable of if we obey Jesus. We can have the courage to get out of the boat and jump into turbulent waters. We will be amazed at the power of God working through us; we might experience on our version of walking on water. Even if we fall short, we know that Jesus will bring us safely through.

We think we are going through crises, and we are. How does our crisis compare with the crisis that Julius Jones is facing? Or the Navajo nations? Or the Kasongo family? CW and Judy in our own congregation are facing health crises. It puts our own troubles in perspective. There is plenty of suffering all around us.

We can withdraw into the safety of our boats and just try to make it through the night. But Jesus calls us to get out of the boats and jump into the choppy waters. There are people who are hurting and we could be agents of healing.

### **Third Move: Truth and Reconciliation**

We will continue to minister to Julius and to the Kasongo family. We also can raise our awareness about the systemic racism in this country and in our churches.

I have been reading two books that were just released in the last two weeks. Both are geared for general audiences. I would like to tackle both of them in our Wednesday night discussion group this fall.

The first is *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, by Robert P. Jones. We read his previous book, *The End of White Christian America*, on Wednesday nights three years ago. *White Too Long* is a powerful wake-up call to white Christians. *White Too Long* is part of a quote by James Baldwin in an article in the New York Time in 1968. He says that he is afraid that America's white population has been white too long to have any hope of moral rehabilitation.

Jones chronicles the history of white supremacy in the Southern Baptist tradition, which he grew up in. He also describes how American Protestant theology lends itself to white supremacy. Sin is seen as personal sin, not as social injustice. Police violence is seen as a few bad cops instead of a breakdown in the system. A personal relationship with Jesus counts more than loving your neighbor. The Bible is seen as protecting the status quo instead of challenging it.

Jones reviews the polling data, and it is devastating. American Christians today like to believe that they have warm feelings toward African Americans, but polling data shows unaffiliated white people are much closer in their beliefs on racial issues to African Americans than white Christians. There is negligible difference in the polling on racial issues between white evangelicals, white mainline and white

Catholics. Jones closes with signs of hope in congregation that are working toward truth and reconciliation.

The other book is written by an African-American, Isabella Wilkerson, a journalist, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2011 with her last book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Wilkerson's new book is *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*.

Instead of calling America's original sin racism, Wilkerson describes it as a caste system. It is easy to dismiss claims of racism today; racism is often reduced to personal feelings of prejudice against black people. Unless you catch people on video saying the N-word, they deny that they are racist. A caste system, on the hand, is a social hierarchy that benefits the dominant caste and degrades the lower caste. Wilkerson compares the three great caste systems of modern times, India, Nazi Germany and the United States. The Nazis actually studied Jim Crow laws and miscegenation laws in the United States when they were drafting legislation to stigmatize Jews.

Wilkerson describes eight pillars of caste that she finds in all three countries; those pillars include divine will, purity and stigma. I have only read the first third of the book, so I can't give you a review of the rest of it. Like Jones, Wilkerson closes with hope, describing how America can move forward beyond artificial separation of humans.

I hope the books will inspire us to take action to examine racism in Edmond. As you know, Edmond was a sundown town. The Royce Café at 4<sup>th</sup> and Broadway had a sign in its front window that warned blacks to be out of town by sundown. A black family was not allowed to move into Edmond until the 1970s, when Edmond Memorial recruited Richard Turner for its football team. Edmond experienced rapid growth in the 1970s and 1980s as a white-flight suburb when a busing plan was implemented by the courts to desegregate Oklahoma City schools.

We can research Edmond's history and publicize it within the community. Perhaps we can get the Edmond Historical Society to include a permanent exhibit on Edmond's racist past.

We also can pursue an idea that Jones talks about in the closing chapters of *White Too Long*. The Equal Justice Initiative, founded by Bryan Stevenson, has constructed a new museum in Birmingham called the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. It commemorates the victims of lynchings in the United States. At the center of the memorial are 805 hanging steel rectangles, representing each of the counties in which a lynching took place. More than 4075 lynchings have been documented between 1877 and 1950. The Equal Justice Initiative is asking

representatives of each of the 805 counties to claim their monument and establish a memorial in their county at the site of lynchings. Jones describes how congregations have taken pilgrimages to the museum to claim their memorials. We can make our own pilgrimage.

Elizabeth Overman, a political science professor at UCO, has been working for several years on a lynching project in Oklahoma. Elizabeth serves with me on the Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. We could work with Elizabeth to memorialize the victims of lynchings in Edmond and Oklahoma County. We could put up roadside markers at the site of each lynching.

## **Conclusion**

I hope that the protests surrounding the George Floyd killing have lasting impact and can begin to dismantle the racially-based caste system in America. I hope it leads to America's own version of truth and reconciliation that exposes the ugly truth about the caste system that white Americans prefer not to look at.

We can do our part. We can get out of the boat and confront this ugly past. When we do, we will find Jesus already there, standing in solidarity with the victims.

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