

TAKE MY HAND

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Matthew 14:22-33

When I was a kid—age 10 or so—I got my hands on a pair of large, inflatable feet. These were like beach balls except they were foot-shaped and each had a hole in the top where you could put your own foot. They were more like large, inflatable clown shoes. The idea was that a person could put them on and walk on water. I was very excited to try them. Who wouldn't want to walk across the top of the water? For a 10 year old, that is a super-power. I inflated the feet, took them down to the water's edge, and gave it a shot. They did not work. They did not even come close to working. Even though I probably weighed less than 100 pounds, I just sank. The feet went in the trash.

Today, we read from the gospel of Matthew—the account of Jesus walking on water, on the Sea of Galilee. Back in 1999, I was also on the Sea of Galilee. I was traveling with a group of ministers on a tour of the Holy Land. The tour included the region of Galilee and even a boat ride out onto the Sea of Galilee. (It's really just a big lake.) We were about a half-mile offshore in the northern section of the lake in the area where Jesus had lived. Suddenly, the motor on the boat goes quiet and the tour guide announces that we are having engine trouble and to get back to shore we will need to walk. Ha ha. Preacher humor. Everyone laughed. Well, except for the Pentecostal preacher who said he could walk on water if the rest of us just believed harder.

In our reading today, Jesus sends the disciples across the lake by boat while he walks up a hill to pray. He is alone. The disciples are caught in a storm on the lake and the winds push them away from where they want to be. This goes on all night. Early in the morning, after fighting the storm for hours, the disciples spot Jesus walking toward them across the water. He's wearing these huge, inflatable feet. (No. No, he's not.) The disciples are terrified and are sure they are seeing a ghost. Jesus speaks to them and says, *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.* Peter steps forward and responds, *Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.* And Jesus calls Peter saying, *Come.* So Peter climbs over the gunwale, and steps onto the water. He walks toward Jesus until he notices the powerful winds around him. He gets scared and then begins to sink. He shouts out, *Lord, save me,* and Jesus reaches out his hand and grabs him saying, *You of little faith, why did you doubt?* They climb into the boat together and the wind subsides. The disciples in the boat declare, *Truly you are the Son of God.*

The time-honored way to approach this passage is to view it as a story about faith and our lack of it. Jesus walks across the water to the boat and calls Peter to him. Peter goes toward Jesus in faith but is distracted by the wind, and his faith

wavers, and he sinks. Through the telling of this story, Matthew seems to be telling his congregation to stay faithful in Jesus, to push all their doubts to the side, to keep their eyes on the prize, to acknowledge that Jesus is truly the son of God. Do that and you can walk on water. I'm sure you have heard that sermon preached on more than one occasion. But as I have done in the past weeks, I ask that we consider the context of this particular passage and then maybe we can see it in a different light.

As you recall from last week, John the Baptist has recently been executed by Herod. Upon hearing this news, Jesus set out to be alone, but the crowds followed him. He has compassion on the crowds and heals the sick among them. Then he feeds them—over 5,000 people. The disciples are with him and they distribute the food and collect the leftovers. No doubt they worked hard all day. If I were to guess, I would say that this event with the 5000 lasted more than one day—maybe a couple of days. That means the disciples had been working that long as well. After dismissing the crowds, Jesus sends the disciples ahead by boat telling them that he will catch up with them later. Jesus then goes up a hill to pray.

If we look at the story in this context we will understand that more than likely the disciples are at this point physically and emotionally exhausted. They have been caring for the crowd for several days and fighting the storm all night and rowing and paddling to get to shore. They are tired, worn-out, and spent. They have been battered by the waves and the wind is against them. To anyone that has been on a boat, this is a challenging situation. Then, on top of that, this figure appears in the storm, strolling across the waves. The disciples believe they are seeing a ghost, but the figure says to them, *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.* It is Jesus.

With these words, Jesus is not so much denying that he is a spirit, but seems to be making three assertions—Be strong. I am here. Do not be afraid. The second assertion, “I am here,” can also be translated as “I am.” “I am” is almost certainly an echo of the name God reveals to Moses from the burning bush—I am who I am.¹ To anyone in distress these are powerful words—Be strong. I am [God]. Do not be afraid. Peter's stepping out onto the water is not so much a matter of faith but it is his desire to be with the one that he calls *Lord*—the “I Am.” Then, when he realizes that the storm winds continue to blow, he gets scared. And Jesus reaches out and pulls him up. But Jesus calling Peter one of *little faith* is not an admonition of Peter's failure to believe, but an acknowledgment of the lack of faith we all are guilty of. Why did you doubt, Jesus asks. He seems a little surprised. Don't you know “I am” is with you. Once in the boat with the Lord, the storm ceases to exist.

We can look at this as a story of doubt and faith, but we can also view it as a powerful reminder that God is always present in our lives, even at the lowest points

¹ Exodus 3:14

when we are exhausted and beaten, when the world has taken everything from us. For example, there are times when I feel great, when I feel like I can walk on water. But then there have been a few times when the only thing I see is darkness and pain and despair. Sadly, many of us are too familiar with these times of darkness and exhaustion, even hopelessness. Maybe it stems from an illness or a debilitating condition. Maybe it is due to a trying relationship or a betrayal. It could be based in an addiction. It could be your work, or a terrible loss, or more. Matthew is telling his people—telling us—that even in these times that God is with us walking through the storm to reach out and catch us, to pull us up from where we are sinking.

Thomas Andrew Dorsey was born in Georgia in 1899. His father was Baptist preacher and his mother was a piano teacher. Early on, it became evident that Dorsey was a talented musician. As a musician, Dorsey combined African-American church hymns with blues and jazz. His music was controversial but it set the tone for what would become known as gospel music.

At age 16, Dorsey moved to Chicago to study music. He also started playing in nightclubs and was immensely popular. In 1928, his life changed and he became active at the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago and served as the church's choir director for forty years. In his career, he wrote over 1000 jazz, blues, and gospel songs. He formed his own publishing company. Dorsey was the first African-American elected to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. His musical archives are housed at Fisk University.

When Dorsey was 32 years old and recently married, he and his wife were living in Chicago. One day in August he had to go to St. Louis where he was the featured soloist at a large revival meeting. His wife, Nettie, was in her last month of pregnancy with their first child. Reluctantly, he went to St. Louis. As he finished the revival, a Western Union telegram was brought to him informing him that his wife had died. She had given birth to a baby boy but the child did not live but a couple of days. The two were buried together in the same casket. Dorsey writes that following their deaths he “fell apart.” He locked himself up. He was angry at God. He wrote, “I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn’t want to serve Him anymore or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well.” Friends reached out to him. He writes, “I was lost in grief. Everyone was kind to me.” Finally, he sat down at the piano and composed a song. The song that emerged from his despair was “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.”

Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm lone
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

When my way grows drear, precious Lord linger near
When my light is almost gone
Hear my cry, hear my call
Hold my hand lest I fall
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

When the darkness appears and the night draws near
And the day is past and gone
At the river I stand
Guide my feet, hold my hand
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

Dorsey wrote the song and gave it to a friend. The following Sunday it was performed at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta where the pastor was Martin Luther King, Sr. The song was a favorite of King, Jr. It has been recorded by countless people including Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, Elvis Presley, Chet Atkins, and more. It was sung at King's funeral. It was also sung at the state funeral of President Lyndon Johnson.

In this song we hear clearly the grief which pours from great loss and sadness. But also we hear the powerful recognition that God is still there, always reaching out, taking us by the hand, hauling us up into the boat.

This story of Jesus walking on water is not a message about discipleship or service or how to love our neighbor. It is not about keeping God's laws or obeying God's commandments. It is not how about how we can better serve God. It is simply a declaration that God cares for us, watches over us, and—even when we are drowning in life's despairs and have given up on God—is there waiting to take us by the hand and "lead us home."

And for this we can be truly thankful. Amen.