

### *Walking on Water*

The text tells us this happened during fourth watch. That's late. This happens some time between 3 and 6 in the morning. That's so late it's early. I tried to be on watch once, and let me tell you how that turned out...

One summer evening we were out sailing with my dad, and he anchored the boat perilously close to another boat. He assured us that all would be well, and we ate a full dinner and enjoyed a beautiful summer evening. Later in the night, however, as our bodies grew weary and our eyes started to droop, Dad looked at me and asked, "why don't you take the first watch?" It wasn't a question, but more of a suggestion. "I'll sleep for a few hours and come relieve you. I want to be sure we don't drift into that boat." With that everyone else headed off to the comforts of bed.

So there I was, alone in the dark, staring at that boat next to us. It might have been 20 feet away, bouncing slowly with the movement of the water beneath it. I sat, reclined against the cabin, the sound of water lapping against the boat, the gentle movement of the boat rocking me to sleep. As the other lights in the harbor winked out, one by one, I was blanketed by the heavy darkness of night, and I felt like a solitary figure taking refuge in the cover of night, the only watch while others slept. I stared and I stared, fighting off the desire to sleep.

Several hours later I woke up, and upon looking at my watch and realizing that my father had no intention of leaving a warm bed to come and relieve me from my duties, I went down and got into my own bunk for the remainder of the night.

The temptation to sleep had been too great, and anyone who saw me at the ice cream social last week knows about my ability to resist temptation...

Now I am not exactly used to the rigors of nightly watches. These sailors would have been different. They might have been accustomed to life on the sea, perhaps even numb to the rough waters that were pushing the boat back and forth on this difficult night. Those not on watch might have been soundly asleep, while those on watch had countless ways to stay awake and alert on a windy night.

This night was not like those other nights, though. The men on this boat had just witnessed an extraordinary event. They had seen Jesus Christ take five loaves of bread and two fish and feed five thousand men, plus countless women and children. They had urged Jesus to send the crowd away so they might eat, but he had replied with a miracle, an extraordinary event just before their eyes, and then they had collected twelve baskets of leftovers, an exclamation point to a story almost too wonderful to believe.

Just after this event, before there could be any debate or discussion, Jesus orders the disciples into a boat and sends them to the other side. As evening settled in Jesus was alone on the shore, while the boats were battered by waves far from land.

Late in the evening, or early in the morning, Jesus Christ sought out the ones he loves. We don't know why he waited, but whoever was on watch, peering into the heavy darkness, must have rubbed his eyes twice when he saw Jesus walking across the water, feet upon the waves, towards the boat. Perhaps he even wondered what exactly was in that bread that Jesus had handed out. Expecting to spend a weary and uneventful watch keeping himself awake, this man instead saw Jesus the Christ walking towards the

boat. As he roused the others we read that the prevailing emotion was terror; what else but a ghost could be walking out of the darkness towards their boat?

Jesus spoke directly to their fears, and the words he said to them are the same words he speaks to us today: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." He urges them to have courage in the face of terror, to be strong when faced with fear, to look to the Lord and forget the wind and the waves.

But Peter speaks out, just as we speak out, wondering how we are to have courage, how we are to know that we can trust the Lord in these uncertain times. Peter asks the Lord to command him out onto the water, to draw him close to the Lord in the midst of his fear. Do we not ask the same, beseeching the Lord to draw us near, to be present in our times of trial, to perform mighty acts so that we can have strength and confidence in our Lord?

Jesus answers with a word: "Come." He bids Peter to step from the realm of fear into the realm of the impossible, the miraculous, and to rely upon God for what is not possible for humans. He calls Peter from the safety of the boat to place his life in the hands of Christ. What follows is nothing short of remarkable. I believe Dale Bruner puts it best: "A believing disciples and an enabling Lord do the impossible, master the elements, and for a brief moment give the church a glimpse of her unearthly possibilities in the world." This is the moment in which Peter, in complete faith, focused entirely on Christ, is enabled by God to step upon the waters and walk towards the Lord Jesus Christ. What I would give to see the looks upon the faces of the disciples as their friend and companion strode upon the waves!

What I would give to feel the waves slapping against the bottom of my feet as Jesus Christ bids me, “Come.”

This moment ends sharply, as Peter’s fear catches up with his feet, and his body recognizes the wind and the waves, and suddenly the enormity of what he is doing overwhelms him and drives him into the waters, and his cry is one that echoes through the ages and is found upon the lips of us all: “Lord, save me!”

Just as Jesus reaches out to us, Jesus reached out to Peter immediately and hauled the sinking man to safety, raising him up from the grip of the waters. Then, out on the water, one man secure upon the waves while the other clings to him for dear life, Peter is asked, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Truly this was an incredible act, one that led all those in the boat to worship Jesus and confess him as the Son of God. Jesus Christ, Lord of all creation, was capable of anything because of the power of God.

But what would have happened had the man on watch given in to the power of sleep and not noticed this ghostly figure walking across the waves?

Would Jesus have simply gone ahead, meeting them on the opposite shore the next morning? Or would he have climbed into the boat, sneaking past the sleeping watchman to assume his position with the rest? In either case there would have been wonder as to how he got there, but we would have lost this treasure, this moment of grace and power, this show of potential. We would have lost this leap of faith into the windy chaos, it would have slipped quietly away without celebration or worship, lost to the depths of time.

This question leaves me to wonder what else was missed by the disciples? How many other acts or miracles did Jesus perform without curious eyes to observe? If his public ministry was three years, surely other acts just as remarkable must be lingering in human history, unknown to all.

And then I started to think...

What are we missing now? What are we sleeping through, as our weariness and our busy-ness weighs upon our eyes and we slip into a slumber, not noticing or observing the world around us? What kind of moments of grace and power are we missing, asleep on the watch?

How many times have you looked back upon moments or events and realized that God has been acting, in strange and powerful ways, bringing people in and out of your life that have changed the course of your life?

How often have we seen entire communities change because of certain events or certain people, only to realize later how remarkable it all was, how the timing and the events worked out just perfectly to bring a change for the better? How often do we see wondrous things and not recognize them for the miracles they are?

Many years ago Jesus walked on water across the sea to reach a boat that held the ones he loved. It was unexpected; it was miraculous, and the people in the boat worshipped him because they recognized the miracle that had occurred before their very eyes.

Today, in this place, in front of our very eyes, God's grace and power are still at work. God has saved us through grace, freed us from death and sin and given us life. It does not stop there. God has gathered us in this place and empowered us to live for God! Just yesterday the Presbyterian Women held a luncheon to celebrate the miracles God has been working through

them. Just last week we held an ice cream social to celebrate the gifts of fellowship and worship. The Food Bank, Habitat for Humanity, the Samaritan Center are all examples of God's grace and power at work through dedicated individuals. Each of these are incredible gifts of God, and I hope we take the time to recognize them as examples of God in our midst. Let's not be sleepwalkers, going through life unaware of the reality of God's presence around us. Let's not be asleep on the watch and miss the extraordinary things going on around us. Let's not forget that the God who strode boldly across the waves is still calling us to do miraculous things, to love and worship God with all of our hearts, minds and souls. Let's be watchful, aware, ready to stand up and say that truly Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is in our midst, a fact just as miraculous as the one that these men witnessed so many years ago.

Let us pray.

Thursday, August 28, 2008