

August 10, 2008
Matthew 14:22-33
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
© Mary E. Beard

Stepping Out

Water Water Everywhere...

In recent weeks it feels like we have constantly been walking on water, even if only fractions of an inch of it. Remember back in the middle of July when we were hoping for rain. The gardens were parched and the grass was withering. We'd had dry sunny weather for days on end. Well, we got what we wanted. Now, we'd be happy for more of that sunshine.

It reminds me of the August that our daughter Lauren was born. Today is her twenty-third birthday. The summer she was born we were living in New Jersey. When she was only a couple of weeks old, we came to Maine looking forward to August weather. Instead, it was cold and rainy the whole time we were here. I don't think it got above of the 50's all week. I remember feeling disappointed and disgruntled. It's harder for me now to complain about rain after living fourteen years in the Sonoran desert. Although after these last few weeks it's getting easier.

This summer I saw someone walk on water. In fact, I saw two people walk on water. It wasn't at Popham Beach. Although when I was there and watched people wading through the water on the sand bar I realized it does give that impression. No, the walking on water I saw was on the *Ellen Degeneres* show. During my time off in July I got to do a number of things I don't usually do, which included occasionally watching *Ellen* with our daughter Karin. The walking on water show involved a segment with a man who does interesting science experiments. He did several amazing things, but the grand finale was walking on water. You probably won't be surprised to hear that the water had

something in it. It wasn't lots of heavy reeds. It wasn't hidden rocks. It was cornstarch. Yes, ordinary cornstarch but lots of it. And I mean lots of it. The mixture had the appearance of a milky liquid. You could put your hand down in it, and it would come up looking goopy. If you stood still on it you would sink. However, if you punched it quickly, it was firm. It has something to do with the chemical reaction of the cornstarch and water and the application of force. If you ran quickly over a large container of it you would not sink. So, actually they didn't walk on water, but they ran across it. It was fun to watch. Later Karin and I did make some cornstarch mixture to experiment with but not enough to run on.

Today's gospel story uses the image of walking on water. We understand the setting of today's story. Here in Maine we know both the joys and dangers of boats out on the water. We know about a sudden change in weather and the arrival of a fierce and dangerous wind. Since the story says it is the fourth watch (3-6 am), it is that time when the shadows and loneliness of night are meeting the dawn of a new day. After a long night in stormy weather it is the time when exhaustion and glimmers of hope meet each other.

We also understand the setting of the story in that Jesus is not with the disciples. They are on their own. Jesus had sent them on ahead because he needed some time to himself. We have had times when we wondered where Christ was.

As Jesus returns to the disciples we see his encounter with Peter, who is symbolic of all the disciples. Peter is tired and

frightened. Just recently they all received news of the beheading of John the Baptist. They are worried about what Herod has in mind for Jesus. They have been traveling from village to village. More and more people keep coming to see Jesus, to listen to his wisdom and to ask for his healing. It's harder and harder for the disciples to have time alone with him. Now, Jesus has gone off and left them, and this bloody storm with its fierce wind is buffeting them to and fro. It's just too much. The fear factor is running high.

We like Peter have experiences of being tired and frightened. These days, we are uneasy about the turmoil in the national economic landscape –it's impact not only on us but also on our children. We are concerned about the changing economic realities in our region with the closing of the air base, as the articles in the Times Record have been covering recently. In our congregation, we have also been buffeted by the winds of conflict and upset in the changes we have experienced in our own congregation this past year. And then of course, we each have matters close to our hearts in our families and our own lives that keep us awake at night, or wake us up in those early morning hours of the fourth watch.

In the midst of the turmoil Peter catches a vision of light, a way through the storm – the presence of Jesus. Peter and Jesus have a complex relationship, as we will continue to see in the weeks ahead. Peter is headstrong. Instead of waiting for Jesus to come to him, he asks Jesus to call him forth. A bit presumptuous. But when it happens, then Peter isn't so sure. He steps forth, but then reconsiders. Maybe, it would be better to be back in the boat. When the consultant from Alban Institute whom we worked with this winter was here and met with small groups of people, I

understand he asked people what was an image of the church for them. He told me that he was struck by the fact that so many people suggested the image of a ship. I've noticed that if you look at our ceiling it gives me the impression of the keel of a boat, and we do live in a maritime environment, so I wasn't surprised.

We always live between courage and anxiety. Sometimes we are more aware of it. In the days, weeks, and months ahead, there will times to stay in the boat, but there will be times when we have to step out – step out of our comfort zone – step out of our way we have always done things – step out of our perceptions that God is mostly present in the boat.

Remember, Jesus was coming to the disciples from outside the boat. Where is Christ outside of our gathering, coming toward us? Are we checking the horizon?

In courage Peter steps out, then he cries out in his fear. Jesus asks him, "Why did you doubt?" Matthew uses a peculiar word in this story that is translated "doubt." This word connotes vacillation, not skepticism. (New Interpreter's Bible, VIII, p. 328)

It's not that Peter is a total skeptic. It's that he's caught with one foot in both places – one foot in the water and wanting to put the other one back in the boat. He's vacillating. Sometimes the chaos you know (in the boat in the storm) is better than the freedom of walking on the water with Jesus. What if I, or we, sink?

Remember the Hebrews after they were freed from Egypt. After awhile in the uncertain and difficult, even though free, life in the wilderness they were ready to trade it all in and go back to slavery in Egypt.

We watch people caught in personal chaos who much to everyone's dismay are unable to walk toward freedom. They are stuck. As many twelve-step programs say, sometimes people have to hit bottom first. Then there is no room to step back in the boat. There is no back. The only way is out.

As disciples of Jesus, we wonder, individually and collectively, what we might have to give up to step out on the water with Christ. It looks exciting, but it also looks dangerous and unfamiliar. And the more solid the boat behind you the more it seems you have to lose. Discipleship is a mixture of courage and anxiety.

When I think of courage and fear this week, I think of the Olympics. I like to watch the Olympics. I, along with billions of others, will remember the pageantry of the opening ceremonies. The power of the collective when you listen to 2,008 men drumming in unison is amazing. Yet, I suspect most of us will also remember, one solitary individual: one small, nine-year-old boy Lin Hao (Leen How) who walked into the stadium with the Chinese team. Leen How was in the earthquake in Sichuan Province this past May. He was in his classroom when the earthquake hit as so many children were. Twenty of his thirty classmates died. He dug his way out and then went back in for two others. When asked how he was able to do that, he said that he was a class leader, a hall monitor, and that it was his responsibility. In the midst of the chaos, in the midst of unbelievable fear and anxiety he stepped into courage.

The world's nations have engaged both their courage and their anxiety and come together in Beijing. I appreciate that in spite of criticism President Bush has chosen

to be present along with other world leaders. It is symbolic of opening a new way to be together in the world. The Olympic experience is introducing new aspects of China to the world, but it is also introducing the world to the Chinese people. It will change us all in ways we can't yet imagine.

Jesus' key message to Peter in this story is "Fear Not." In fact in some ways this is the central message of all the Scriptures. These are usually the first words out of angels' mouths and they occur over 100 times in Scripture. Jesus says, "Fear not. It is I." In other words, be not afraid for I am with you.

They are crucial words because we are fearful creatures. Fears – both rational and irrational – are at the heart of our make up. It is ironically a good thing. Fear helps keep us alive. We instinctively are afraid of falling. Through experience, we learn where to be cautious. On the other hand fear begins to hold us hostage. We can become over cautious – seeing danger at every turn. And, we are also trained to be afraid. Advertisers, politicians, and religious leaders know how to use fear to get us to buy their products, their policies, and their theologies. Fear makes money, buys votes, and controls people.

As Rev. Todd Weir writes, "Fear comes in many forms, private and public. It knows no ideological boundaries and none of us are ever completely free of it in making decisions. Letting go of fear and facing ourselves is as frightening as the thought of stepping out of our safe boats and walking across the water as if it were dry land." (www.bloomingcactus, 2005.)

Fear not. Let us step out... as a nation, as individuals, and as a congregation, trusting in the presence of the holy one.