

Key Texts Study #9 for March 7, 2017—Matthew 14:22-36

General Background on Matthew: We continue reading from the gospel of Matthew. Matthew is believed to have been written around 80-90 CE.

Matthew was clearly written by a Jewish author and displays distinctively Jewish concerns. More than any of the other gospels, Old Testament passages are quoted and expanded upon—a sign that the author wants to show that Jesus legitimately fulfilled Biblical prophecy. Jesus is shown to be the long awaited Messiah of Old Testament prophecy.

Yet, Matthew is also full of very critical passages, aimed toward the leaders of Judaism, especially the Pharisees. We read many passages in Matthew that threaten the religious leaders with hell itself. Many scholars believe this reflects the situation of the Church post 70 CE (the temple was destroyed by Rome and Judaism began to draw sharp lines of distinction between itself and what it regarded as the Christian heresy).

There is a lot of teaching material in Matthew, including the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus affirms the place and value of the Law in Matthew. Jesus is the “new Moses,” bringing a new or sharpened understanding of the Law of God.

Background on Today’s Text

Miracles and miracle stories—Each of the four gospels includes stories of Jesus performing miracles. Miracles are not new to Jesus in the Bible—for example, the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha performed many miracles as well. The Bible was written during a pre-scientific age, in which explanations for unusual events were not sought or expected. Because of our scientific and rational mindset, the Bible’s description of these events often strains credulity.

But consider this. What if Jesus had produced a little black device and tapped it once or twice, and then spoke to someone across the Atlantic Ocean. Would people have considered that a miracle? (Remember—they didn’t even know there was world beyond the Atlantic!) Of course! The idea that voices can travel thousands of miles in an instant would have been at least as miraculous as the sight of a man walking on the water or of loaves of bread somehow multiplied to feed thousands of people. So we should not be so skeptical of miracles. They happen all the time—it is just that today, we have explanations for many of the miracles we witness. Who knows: we may one day learn how to multiply bread and walk on water that is not frozen!

Still, the point of the miracle stories in the Bible is not to challenge reason or science. The point is not the fact of the miracle, but why they take place and especially, who makes them possible.

Which is to say: the theological meaning of the miracle story is more important than questions like “Did that actually take place” or “How did Jesus do that?” For me, the riches of these stories become accessible only when I stop worrying about such questions and ask instead what these texts tell me about God’s grace and love as they are revealed in Jesus.

Jesus—the Son of God. Matthew is concerned to show us that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God. A key passage in this gospel comes right after the death of Jesus, when the Roman centurion observes: “Truly, this man was the Son of God.” (27:54) A key to understanding the miracle stories in Matthew is to see them as keys to Jesus’ identity. He is not just the Son of Man or the Messiah, but the Son of God. Matthew’s intention shows up clearly in our text for today.

Read Matthew 14:1-14.

In the verses preceding our text, note:

- At the end of the grisly account of John’s beheading, Jesus appears to need time for himself to grieve the death of his friend/relative—and to process what has happened. But the crowds so need him that they follow him wherever he goes. Jesus’ response is a compassionate one: he responds to their need with healing love.

Read Matthew 14:15-24.

- The feeding of the 5000 here differs only slightly from the account we read in Luke last week. Note that at the end of the account, after exposure to so many people for such an extended period of time, Jesus again dismisses the crowds and withdraws to a place by himself to pray.

Now read our text in entirety: Matthew 14:22-34.

- What stands out for you in this story? What questions arise? How does the story connect to your life?

Read again verses 22-27.

- Note how Jesus needs time for himself, time to pray. Why do you think he “went up a mountain” to do that? Does this recall for you anything about Matthew’s view of Jesus—who Jesus is, what Jesus has already done in this gospel?
- Do you need time for yourself? Do you find time to pray? Where do you go to pray? What does prayer do for you?
- In v. 24-25, we find the disciples in a boat, battered by waves at sea. The passage is deeply symbolic. The sea is associated with chaos and danger in the ancient world. So the disciples are threatened by the arch-enemy of God, primeval chaos. In the New Testament, boats are symbolic of the Church. So we have the church, small and fragile, being battered by the stormy, chaotic world. And the disciples are, naturally, afraid.

- Have you ever been in a boat on a lake when the wind arose? Have you ever been fearful of water?
- Are there ways in which the church today is battered by storms? Do you think the church is afraid in our world? How about you?
- In verses 25-27, Jesus famously walks on water. (Think of all the jokes you've heard about walking on water!) Oddly, when the disciples see him, they are even more afraid than before and think he is a ghost. They express their terror in audible cries. Jesus calms them with his voice. The words he speaks are highly symbolic and all important: "Take heart, **it is I**; do not be afraid." The words "it is I" are from the Greek, "Egw eimi" or literally "I am." This should remind us of the name of God in Exodus: Yahweh—I AM. In the Old Testament, several passages speak of God walking on the water, "trampling" the sea of chaos. So here, Jesus is clearly claiming Divine status. He can do what only God can do!
- Can you tell a ghost story? A time when something inexplicable happened, when you were terrified by something you could not immediately explain or understand? Such things do happen to people!
- Does the Word of God, do the words of Jesus bring calm and healing to you? How so?
- What does it say to you that Jesus **is** God?

Read vs. 28-33.

- Here **Peter** walks on water, like his Lord. Thinking of water in the symbolic sense and of Peter as first among the disciples, what does this say to you about us?
- When does Peter begin to sink and succumb to fear?
- Jesus pairs together the words faith and doubt. Talk about the struggle between faith and doubt in your life. Are there times when doubt overwhelms you?
- When Peter cries out to Jesus in fear, "Lord, save me," what does Jesus do? What does this tell you about Jesus' response to our doubts?
- When Jesus gets into the boat, the wind ceases. The sea calms. It is the presence of Jesus that does this. How do the disciples recognize this? Compare their statement with Jesus' words in v. 27. With the words of the centurion after Jesus dies.

Read vs. 34-36.

- How are these closing words like v. 13-14, earlier in this chapter.
- Note that even **touching** the **fringe** of Jesus' coat was enough to bring healing. What does this say about the identity of Jesus?

Prayer for the week: O God, life so often seems chaotic. We feel battered, threatened by storms all around us. Yet you come to us; you take your place with us. Calm our hearts, O God, and give us confidence to step out onto the sea. Give us courage and faith to embrace risk. Accomplish great things through us, fearful and doubting as we are. Amen.

Coming Weeks--

Week of March 13-19: John 9:1-41

Week of March 20-26: Mark 5:1-20

Week of March 27-April 2: John 11:1-44