

March 12, 2025 – Matthew 14:22-33

Matthew 14 records a pair of well known miracles that, at first glance, don't seem like they have much in common. First, we get the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus is looking for a little solitude to grieve after the death of his friend and cousin, John the Baptist. But the crowds refuse to give him any peace or rest. Despite withdrawing to what scripture describes as a desolate place in the middle of the wilderness, the crowds chase him down and find him.

Jesus has compassion on them. He heals their sick and preaches to them until evening. At which point the disciples suggest that he dismiss the crowds so that they can get back to the towns and villages around them and buy food before the markets close. But Jesus has something else in mind.

He tells the disciples, *“You give them something to eat.”* Which baffles them. Because the only food they have is five loaves of bread and two fish. Not even enough for the thirteen of them to have dinner, let alone feed this crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children.

But Jesus, of course, has a plan. He takes the loaves and the fish in his hands, blesses them, breaks them, and gives them to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. And by the time that they are finished, every single man, woman, and child there is fed. Including the disciples themselves, who gather twelve baskets of leftovers to have for their own meal.

The second miracle of Matthew 14 is what we read in our Gospel lesson this evening and directly follows the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus sends the disciples ahead of him, across the Sea of Galilee, while he dismisses the crowd. And then he finally gets the time alone to pray and grieve that he had been seeking in the first place.

The disciples find themselves out on open water in the middle of the night. This should have been a fairly quick trip, but they are fighting against a fierce headwind that makes their progress extremely slow. So they are still far from shore at around 3AM. And that's when they see him.

Jesus. Walking on the water towards them. They think he's a ghost and cry out in fear. But Jesus speaks to them calmly, *“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”* The disciples are skeptical and Peter decides to test this apparition. *“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”*

It's actually a fairly good idea and Jesus goes along with it. After all, Peter isn't doubting that Jesus could walk on water if he wanted to. He's just unconvinced that this is actually Jesus. And if this is Jesus, well then he should have no problem making Peter walk on water too. This isn't doubt. This is discernment.

So Jesus calls him out of the boat. And Peter walks on water. All the way until he... doesn't. For once he's actually out on the waves, his faith quickly turns to fear. And that fear turns to doubt. Jesus reaches down and grabs hold of him as he sinks. *“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”*

Like I said, two well known miracles of Jesus. And yet, they don't seem to have much in common. Feeding 5,000 and walking on water. What do those have to do with each other? Well, probably more than you realize.

For one thing, the two miracles are different than Jesus' usual miracles. Look through the Gospels and you'll find two miracles that pop up almost every time Jesus preaches: healing people and casting out demons. Over and over again, Jesus shows up in a town and scripture says he healed people or he cast out demons or both. In fact, the feeding of the 5,000 starts with exactly that statement: *“When [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.”* Either physically or spiritually, Jesus is almost always healing people.

But not here. These miracles aren't about healing, either physically or spiritually. They're about creating. They're about the creator of this world coming into his creation and doing what he did in the beginning.

What does Jesus do in the feeding of the 5,000? He creates. He takes five loaves and two fish and from this meager meal he creates enough food for thousands. He provides for his children just as he provided for Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden. He shows the crowds the same fatherly provision that led him to make this perfect world in the beginning.

What does Jesus do when he walks on water? He commands his creation. He takes authority over it. He shows that he is above and beyond the forces of this universe. Things like gravity and water are nothing to Jesus because he made them. They respond to his presence as the creation responding to its creator, with absolute submission and obedience.

These two miracles reveal Jesus as not just a healer. Not just a prophet who has God's ear and can ask for sick people to be healthy again. They reveal Jesus as the creator himself who has stepped into his creation.

And yet, why has he stepped into his creation? Well, go back to that verse I just quoted from the feeding of the 5,000: *"he had compassion on them."* The creator who is above all things still feels compassion for us, his broken, sinful creatures.

And so the hand of the Lord that made the heavens and the earth, the seas and all that are in them, does something amazing in that miracle. He takes the bread and the fish and he looks up to heaven and he blesses it. Why in the world does Jesus bless the bread and the fish?

It's a simpler answer than you might think. Jesus blesses the food because he wants the food to be a blessing to those who receive it. He cares about every single person sitting on that grass. He cares about their hunger. He cares about their sickness. He cares about their bodies. And he cares about their souls. And he wants them to be blessed.

The same thing happens in our Gospel lesson. Peter steps out of the boat and walks out onto the water toward Jesus. But his confidence and faith quickly melts into fear and doubt. And he begins to sink.

Which, in some ways, seems perfectly logical, and in some ways, seems completely absurd. Because, after all, Peter wasn't walking on the water by his own power. It was Jesus doing it all along. So if he's not walking on the water because of his faith, why does he sink because of his doubt?

Well, he doesn't really sink because of his doubt. He sinks because Jesus lets him sink. And Jesus lets him sink because Peter needs to realize that the fear and doubt that he's feeling are sinful. If you believe that Jesus really is the creator of this world made flesh and he that he has power over every single aspect of this creation. Power even to walk on the very water he made. Then there is no room for fear or doubt. So as confident and faithful as Peter pretends to be, there's a lot more sin working in his heart than he wants to admit.

There's a lot more sin working in our hearts than we want to admit. And that sin usually rears its ugly head when we least expect it. The disciples weren't afraid of the wind and waves as long as they were in the boat. They were experienced fishermen. The wind was a nuisance that was keeping them from getting where they wanted to go. But it wasn't something they feared. The ghost that was walking on the water towards them was scary. But the wind and the waves? Pfft. Nothing.

That's probably what Peter thought when he suggested getting out of the boat. And then he found himself in a situation unlike any he had ever been in before. Entrusting his entire life to Jesus. And suddenly those winds and waves were the most frightening thing in the entire world. And the sinful doubt that had been lurking all this time in his heart roared to life.

It's easy to be faithful when we're in control. It's easy to be faithful when everything is going exactly as we expect. It's easy to be faithful when we know what to do and we have the power to do it. But the moment we hand everything over to Jesus, sin appears in our hearts in ways that we never expected. Sin that was there all along, and we were just too over-confident and too self-righteous to admit it.

Peter sinks because he needs to know how sinful he really is. And yet, Peter doesn't drown. He cries out, *"Lord, save me."* And the hand of the Lord reaches out for him. The hand of the Lord that once formed the first man out of the dust of the earth takes hold of Peter and does not let him drown.

The hand of the Lord takes hold of you too. He holds you in the palm of his hand. And he doesn't let you go. Even when you are drowning because of your own fear and doubt. The hand of the Lord will still save you.

And so, we worship Jesus with the disciples, *"Truly you are the Son of God."* The Son of God who made all things. The Son of God who provides all that we need. The Son of God who calls us into acts of faith that stretch our sinful capabilities. The Son of God who always saves us. O you of little faith, why do you doubt? Take heart. Our Lord is with us. Do not be afraid. Amen.