

## Strength In the Midst of Turmoil<sup>1</sup>

The story is told in my family about a time when I—a little boy now—sat and listened to a room full of grownups talking. They were concerned about an aunt, I think who, had gotten suddenly ill, keeled over, fell off the couch, and landed unconscious on the floor. I'm told that I listened to all of this intently and then famously piped up with the question: "What color was the couch?"

Today, we're looking at the story of Jesus walking on water. And I want to urge myself first of all, and all of us, not to ask the what-color-was-the-couch question. The wrong question is "How can someone walk on water?" We could spend time speculating whether this was an optical illusion, some kind of illusionist trick, or whatever. All interesting. And a waste of time.

We'd be on much more solid ground by entering this story much as we experience a dream or a song, which is to simply let it sweep us up and touch us in whatever way it might.

Put yourself out on the water with the disciples. Some of you know the terror of riding perilously on wild seas. Feel that fear. Feel the exhaustion of keeping a boat upright. Not only have you worked all day, but you're trying to sail at night. Now it's four or five in the morning—the fourth watch—

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on August 10, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga.

and you're still struggling to keep the boat from capsizing. Think of this. The whole Christian movement is in that boat. Precious cargo to be sure. All in deep peril.

It's also dark. The old story tellers would commonly use a night sea passage to suggest not only a perilous earthly situation, but also turmoil of the mind or even the underworld or the dwelling of the dead. This episode in Jesus' ministry speaks to us of deep things. This is not a lesson on the four steps to beat procrastination.

If you've ever been depressed, experienced deep unquiet, feared spiritual evil, dreaded the end of living, or wondered if life had meaning, this story takes us to that dark, uncomfortable place.

There's more for our imagination. A boat filled with Apostles bobs on the wild waters. Houses and boats are common symbols used in the four gospels to suggest the church.

Imagine the impact this story might have had on those earliest Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman Empire. Bishops were dragged into the arena to be burned or fight wild beasts. Some Christians refused to disclose their beliefs while others courageously went public. Surely, they knew what it meant for the Christian community to be tossed and

fearful and barely surviving. They knew the night sea journey in their own lives and their own congregations.

In the midst of this scene, Jesus appears walking on the sea. We understand why they think he's a ghost. This whole story evokes ideas of the abode of the dead. The moment Jesus appears, a certain strength returns to the disciples. "Take heart, it is I, have no fear." Please note the English words for being "It is I." These remind us of God's self-introduction to Moses at the Burning Bush: "I am who I am." Again, we're dealing with hints and subtlety here. The words hint at the presence of the great "I am." God is near! Miraculously, Jesus comes to his disciples. No storm or scary place can separate Jesus from his followers.

Of course, not only does Jesus walk on water, but Peter walks on water. Peter has the insight to wait until Jesus speaks and commands him to get out of the boat and walk. Suddenly, the very storm, water, and darkness that threatened them are being mastered by them. Peter, who typically represents all disciples, has mastery over even these wild waters.

So, what are you and I to do with this wild and rich story? Let's let it have for us the same impact the incident had on the

original disciples. There is no situation that is beyond our ability to tame if we will follow Jesus' command.

Most of us are familiar with the name Francis of Assisi, the 11<sup>th</sup> century founder of the Franciscan movement. Francis was born the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. As a young man, Francis was a troubadour, lover of life, and soldier. His fast life resulted in his being wounded in a battle between Assisi and Perugia. In a dungeon he contracted Malaria. His father ransomed his son and he recovered from the malaria. At first, Francis thought God was calling him to become a knight and join the Crusades. But just as he was starting off, the malaria struck again. Francis was also stricken by depression. One night in his fever and confusion, a mysterious voice confronted him with the realization that he had been serving lesser gods. It summoned him to serve the true Master.

From that swirling feverish night, arose one of the greatest Christians of the Middle Ages, a disciple who inspired thousands to take up the life of preaching and service.

The words of the old hymn carry the burden of this sermon:

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult  
Of life's wild and restless sea  
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth  
Saying Christian, follow me.

If you've come here today in the midst of your own tumult, your own night sea passage, listen for the voice that bids you to amazing new things. Peter's experience out on the water is a great reminder that no situation is beyond God's ability to conquer and make right. You may be in grief or confusion, you may be uncertain of your future well-being in these uncertain financial times, you may be recognizing that Christian faith bobs on an uneasy sea of secularism and indifference. Whatever the storm, listen for the voice in the tumult that calls you and me to a new kind of triumph. Then, step out of the boat!