

“He Did WHAT?!”
Matthew 14:22-33
First Presbyterian Church
Marshfield, WI
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In the story of Jesus walking on the water, we encounter one of the many miraculous events associated with Jesus’ life and ministry. The question that was raised early in the 20th century and which has continued ever since is, “How are we to understand and deal with these accounts?” When I went to Princeton Seminary in 1968, the discussion was growing, and at that time Princeton was still fairly conservative. I was lucky to have Bruce Metzger for New Testament, who had been the senior editor of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and Bernhard Anderson in Old Testament. Both of these were giants in their field. To them the Bible was the primary place we encounter God. The words in it are the words of God to us when they bear witness to Jesus Christ, and that witness comes to us through human beings who are inspired by the Lord to write what they have given us. The Bible is not something to be marginalized or trivialized. God intended us to have it in the form that it has been transmitted across the centuries, and we are to take it seriously, for there we meet the Living God.

Contemporary biblical scholars are tending more and more to dismiss the miraculous in the Bible as antithetical to reason and modern experience. In doing so, they diminish the work of all three members of the Godhead. Essentially, they are deciding what God can and cannot do, but how can our small minds even come close to comprehending what the infinite God is able to accomplish. As I approach these accounts, I bring some presuppositions. The first is that I cannot define what is possible for God. Essentially, God is the 800-pound gorilla in the room who can do whatever he chooses. Secondly, I look up at the incredible expanse of the heavens and see not an ongoing accident, but the hand of God moving in amazing majesty. Perhaps due to light pollution, we have lost the awe that the human family once had before the magnificence of the heavens, but if we have, all we need to do is turn to our computers and pull up the images that the Hubble Telescope has enabled us to see. They are incredible beyond measure and only underscore the limitless powers of God. If you wish to pick up the printed form of this sermon, I have included a link to the Hubble images in a footnote.¹

Thirdly, I substituted the Colossians text we read this morning for the Romans text prescribed for today, because it tells us so clearly who Jesus is and what he has done. I want to read that text once more. It says:

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; **16** for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

¹ <http://hubblesite.org/images/gallery>

17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.
19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.
21 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,
22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—
23 provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

My first year in Princeton, I had the chance of doing fieldwork at a fairly large Presbyterian Church almost across the street from the seminary. During the interview with the pastor I asked him the question, “Do you believe that Jesus was divine?” He said he did not, and I chose not to work there, because if one doesn’t believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, that he is God incarnate, then nothing in the Bible makes any sense. We might as well throw it out, as I am afraid too many modern biblical scholars are doing. Without it, creation makes no sense. The miracles of crossing of the Red Sea, the manna in the wilderness, the arrival of quail in the wilderness, the water from the rock, the walking on the water, the raising of the son of the widow of Nain, the feeding of the 5000, the transfiguration, the crucifixion, and the resurrection are all meaningless, imagined stories with no relevance for my life or your life. I’m sorry, but I cannot live in that vacuum or find any meaning in it for my daily life. These events are for me utterly true, and they display Jesus in all his majesty and glory. They undergird my personal experience of his love for me.

The Gospel of John uses a word for these events that is perhaps better than “miraculous.” His word for them is “signs.” In and of themselves, the events are not important, but when they display the nature of the one who does them, then they cannot be ignored. They show us the kind of man and God that Jesus is. His first “sign” in the Gospel of John is the changing of the water into wine. It is a small event, but it shows us first the deep compassion that Jesus had for all people. He chose not to let a young couple and their families be embarrassed, because they had run out of wine at a celebratory moment. It also tells us that the one who made heaven and earth and all that is in them has control over the elements of his created world. He can use and manipulate them to the higher good of giving insight to who he is. That is precisely what he did when he walked on the water. Who but the one described in the Colossians text could control the winds and waves, cause them to bear his weight and that of Peter, allowing them to transcend the mundane to point to the eternal truth that Jesus was indeed the Son of God?

Some have suggested that Jesus did not know that he was the son of God, that he did not know that he bore within him divinity, but that would also suggest that he didn’t do the things the gospels tell us he did. If he were not divine, then he could not have done those

miraculous things. So, we are left with the conclusion that either he knew who he was and used that power for the good of people, or he didn't know and consequently did not do the miracles, and the scriptures are nothing but a collection of myths and stories. I for one would not want to hang my life on that kind of Jesus. He would be utterly irrelevant.

One story that troubles contemporary scholars is the Transfiguration. Many believe it to be a post-resurrection account transported back into the life of Jesus, but again it is because their God isn't big enough to accommodate the inbreaking of the divine into our world. Who was the transfiguration for? Was it for Jesus to show off? Hardly! It was to prepare Peter, James, and John for their future roles as leaders of the church, and to give them some small insight into who this Jesus was. They didn't understand what had happened to them at that moment, as they so often did not, but they understood following Jesus' resurrection. They understood that they had had a foretaste of who and what Jesus was. They could always reach back to that experience for added depth and strength when they were suffering for their proclamation of a suffering and risen Lord.

What about the accounts of Jesus raising the dead? According to the scriptures he raised the son of the widow of Nain, and he raised his friend Lazarus. Do you suppose that the one who hurled the stars into their orbits, and created the planets and suns and nebulae, breathed life into humans and other life forms alike, would be impotent in the face of death? That is just not possible. Both the widow's son and Lazarus were raised as result of Jesus' immense compassion and love for people. How could he let a widow suffer the loss of another person she loved? He couldn't just walk by on the other side of the road and turn his head away. Or Lazarus? Yes, he let him lie in the tomb for four days, so that, given the beliefs of that day, everybody would be sure that he was dead. Only then, did he go out of love for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and raise him, as a sign of the coming resurrection which he would work for us. Not just a spiritual resurrection, but a real one in which our graves will be as empty as was his.

What do we do with an account like the crossing of the Red Sea, or better "the Reed Sea" as the Hebrew says? Some have observed that the waters in the marshy area through which the Israelites may very well have passed can be driven back by strong winds, and that the "miracle" was merely a natural event. But who controls the winds and the waves. Who created them? The miracle in the crossing of the Red Sea, if not of the Charleton Heston variety of a great wall of water on either side, is in the timing. Why did that wind come precisely when needed? And why did the wind cease precisely when needed to shut the gate on the Egyptians? God controls that kind of thing. He can use his natural world to bring about his appointed ends. Why did the manna appear when Israel needed it? Yes, people have seen that phenomenon in the Sinai Peninsula as a natural event, but again why did it occur precisely when needed? Why did the flights of quail arrive, driven in by the wind, at the exact time that the Israelites were getting tired of manna? Wasn't it just an act of God's graciousness and love, manifest in concrete terms? There are no limits to God's love and care for his children, even when we rebel as did the Israelites.

If you have had trouble believing in the signs of Jesus' life and ministry to this point, and to the constancy of God's care for Israel in the wilderness, then you are simply going to shut your eyes and ears to the greatest miracle that God has ever worked, and that is the miracle of his death and resurrection. If we can't believe in the little signs of turning water into wine, walking on the Lake of Galilee, raising the dead, the bringing of Israel through the Red Sea, and the giving of quail and manna in the wilderness, then it will be utterly impossible for us to believe that in his death and resurrection, Jesus has reconciled us to God from whom we have separated ourselves by our willfulness, our self-centeredness, our blindness, and our rejection of a divinely guided way of life. If we can't believe the little things, how can we possibly believe that his cross is the bridge over troubled waters that brings us into God's presence? How can we possibly believe that his death and resurrection have washed away our sins? How can we possibly believe that we have been made new through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?

To push it a little further, how can we possibly believe that on that Sunday morning following his crucifixion his tomb was empty? How can we believe that Mary encountered the Risen Christ, that he appeared to the disciples, and turned quivering, frightened men into persons who were willing to die for the faith they now held in a crucified and risen Lord? These events are so far beyond the capability of language to describe that all sorts of symbols and images are used to convey the indescribable. Luther said that God had to babble like a baby for us to understand him, and so he has. He has used wind, water, quail, a mountain top, dead bodies, wine, and manna to proclaim to us the only hope that matters in the universe. That hope is God's Son, Jesus, who is master of all things. For, once again:

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;

16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

21 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,

22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—

23 provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

This is my compass in life, and will be my beacon in death.

Amen