

RCL YEAR A, Proper 14, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
 1 Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15; St. Matthew 14:22-33  
 St. Edmund's Episcopal Church  
 The Reverend George F. Woodward III

The Episcopal Church recently moved to replace our three year cycle of Sunday readings with the Revised Common Lectionary, the three year cycle used by a majority of the other branches of Christianity. I'm busy revising the introductory illuminations for the readings in that three year cycle in a book to be published with Fred Borsch, our former bishop, in December 2009 so I have more frequent occasion to puzzle over how and when specific lessons have been appointed, and today is one of the great puzzles for me.

It used to be that Matthew's story of Jesus' walk on the water was coupled with the Old Testament story of Jonah in the belly of the great fish. This made it easy for homilists to focus on the story about Jesus, because it was so infinitely preferable to trying to explain the allegory about Jonah! But now Matthew's story is paired with the wonderful account of Elijah's withdrawal to the cave at Horeb, and to complete the mystery, the story of Elijah and Matthew's account of Jesus walking on the water, either one of which could be the subject an hour long sermon, are paired together and buried in the middle of August when half the congregation is off on vacation!

Since I'm talking a bit today about how preachers to about preaching, let me set the stage a bit by focusing first on the background for Matthew's story. The story of Jesus' walking on the water is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, and in all three of those Gospels it follows the account of the feeding of the 5,000. You remember from last week's lesson that Jesus had received news of Herod's murder of his cousin John and was trying to get away for a bit of solitude when he was met by the needy crowd, whom he healed and fed. After the feeding of the 5,000 he does head for the hills alone, sending his disciples ahead by sea.

After these points of agreement, though, there are ways in which the Gospel stories about Jesus' walk on the water underscore the particular interests and concerns of the Gospel authors. The Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, offers us a quick account of Jesus' walk on the sea. The account is eight verses long, and ends by saying that the disciples were astounded, which is probably the minimum that might be said as a witness to such an event.

Scholars tell us that the author of Matthew's Gospel had the earlier Gospel of Mark in hand as he wrote, as did the author of Luke's Gospel, together with other sources. Matthew, we know, had a particular concern for the Church. He gives Peter a prominence not found in the other Gospel's, and indeed neither Mark nor Luke mention this attempt of Peter to step out onto the sea and walk toward Jesus. And only in Matthew's Gospel do the disciples worship Jesus and confess Jesus to be the Son of God at the conclusion of the event.

As this preacher looks at today's presentation of the story of Elijah along side of Matthew's story of Jesus walking on the sea, it seems to me that the common element is fear and the desire for preservation. Elijah has fled to the cave in Horeb in fear of Jezebel, who has put a price on his head. Elijah is in fear for his life, and so are the

disciples in the boat on the sea. Elijah is an individual in trouble. With Matthew's emphasis on the Church, the disciples in the boat represent the Church in difficulty. For Elijah, the individual in trouble, God's help and presence is found not in the mountain splitting wind, the earthquake nor fire, but in God's still voice speaking peace to the inner person. For Matthew, God's presence comes to the Church in trouble by renewed faith in Christ, and a willingness to step out onto the threatening waters in confidence.

Californian Haley Ishimatsu is America's best hope for an Olympic Gold Medal as she dares the 10 meter platform in Beijing. Haley Ishimatsu is terrified of heights. Every dive means finding her inner place of rest and peace. Some fears can only be faced alone, as Elijah faced his fears, returning in victory to Damascus.

The author Polly Berends writes about the day she realized she was an over-protective mother. Her son was trying to learn how to ride a bicycle without training wheels. She would run along side her son encircling her with her arms, steadying him whenever he began to waver, but her son began to say he *couldn't* ride; he'd lose heart, and fall and break into tears. It suddenly dawned on Berens that she was undermining her son's self-confidence. She went back in the house, peeked out the curtains, and watched her son get on his bike and ride away.

Other fears are better faced together, as a Church. I've been reading John Polkinghorne's book *Science and Theology*, which Polkinghorne is uniquely qualified to write as a Nobel Prize winning physicist, and also as an Anglican priest. Polkinghorne introduces us to the often strange world of quantum physics, cosmology and human meaning. It seems possible, when reading Polkinghorne, that divinity may have been at work in Jesus in such a way as to subvert what we understand to be natural law, and all of the Gospel authors do want to make the point that God was at work in Jesus as in no other.

But Matthew's larger point is that the Church is to trust God in times of storm and tumult. The waters are not always smooth for a parish like St. Edmund's, ministering in a time of diminished understanding of the importance of such ministry. These are awkward times also for the Episcopal Church as it navigates those repeatedly arising questions of how authority is conceived and exercised. Matthew would, I think, summon us to be like Peter, daring the waves, and, like Peter, to avail ourselves of a faith fixed on Jesus, who says to the disciples "It is I," "*ego eimi*," a phrase which literally translates "I Am, I Am." God is. God is in Christ. We are hid with Christ in God. On this we stay our hope. Amen. GFW+