

*On the waters of Galilee*

Matthew 14:22-34

Friends, today's passage is a familiar story, a scripture passage of miracle and wonder, this passage of Jesus walking on water. And it's also a passage that has a strong sense of place, a story informed by the geography of its setting.

And I'm going to be honest here, geography is not my strong suit. Actually I'm really, really bad at geography, always have been. I'll admit, until visiting Toates Coulee a few weeks back, I thought Loomis was on the east side of the highway! And I'll admit, as I was preparing this message this week, I can't count how many times I realized I had mixed up east and west and had to go back and edit a bunch.

When I'm reading scripture, it's tough for me to keep track of the geography and the places I'm reading about. But the setting, the geography, the land and region of scripture, they're pivotal to the stories taking place within them.

We might imagine a simple story, "I was hiking and came upon someone who had run out of water, so I gave them the rest of mine." Now let's add some time and place to that story, "I was hiking in Arizona a month after Memorial Day and came upon someone who had run out of water, so I gave them the rest of mine."

Same essential story, but that time and place makes a big difference, doesn't it!

And if someone heard that second version, but had no context to know when Memorial Day was or what sort of place Arizona is - they'd get the essence of the story, but there would be a lot they'd be missing, too

And so, I thought over the next weeks we might explore passages in scripture that are particularly informed by the setting and geography they take place within. In doing so, I hope we might all come to a deeper understanding and familiarity with the settings of scripture. And I hope that we might come to see these stories of scripture in a new light, discover new nuances and details in them.

So let's turn then to this morning's passage from Matthew's Gospel - how does the geography and setting inform this passage?

Well let's take up a first question - where are we in this passage? Where are we located? For that, we can turn back to Matthew 11:1: "After Jesus had finished

instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.”

Galilee is probably a name we're all familiar with to some extent, but what might we learn about this pivotal Biblical location? Well, for starters, Galilee can refer to two things. First, we might be referring to the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a lake, a freshwater lake that stretches about 13 miles long north-to-south and about 7 miles wide east-to-west. And second, we might be referring to the region surrounding this freshwater lake, including the cities and villages on its banks, and the area particularly extending out to the west.

And when we talk about that broader region around the lake, that includes a lot of long-populated towns and cities. For good reason - as this huge body of fresh water, the Sea of Galilee has provided rich water resources for human settlements for literally thousands of years, an important water resource in the midst of this largely arid region. The first recorded historical mention of the region of Galilee comes all the way back from 1468 BCE, from the records of Pharaoh Thutmose III, recording that he captured twenty-three Canaanite cities in Galilee. Again, just the fact that more than 3500 years ago, there twenty-three Canaanite cities that existed to *be* captured around the Sea of Galilee, is evidence of how life-affirming the region surrounding this lake has been for millennia.

So by the time we get to Jesus's day, there have been continuous human settlement around the Sea of Galilee for well over 1500 years. And in the 200 years leading up to the time of Jesus's ministry, there had been particular growth of Jewish settlement around the Sea of Galilee, following the Maccabean revolt of 164 BCE.

And indeed, the Galilee region plays a central roles in Jesus's life and ministry as well. Much of Jesus's life and ministry, including the moments of teaching and ministry that we find in scripture, takes place in one or another of the cities around the Sea of Galilee. In Matthew 4:13, we're told that Jesus actually moves to and lives in one of the larger Galilean cities, Capernaum, which is on the northwestern edge of the lake. Matthew 4:13 reads: "Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali." And in Matthew 9:1, Capernaum is referred to as Jesus's town, with this verse reading, "Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town."

Okay, so we find ourselves at the Sea of Galilee, this pivotal region in the area so central to Jesus. What else is important for us to keep in mind as we approach this morning's scripture passage?

Well for one, it's important to know that the Sea of Galilee is lower than the surrounding land, it's sort of sunken down into the ground. In fact the Sea of Galilee is the lowest freshwater lake in the world, and the second lowest of all lakes in the world, only behind the saltwater lake of the Dead Sea. So when you're at the banks of the Sea of Galilee, the land raises up all around the lake. On the eastern edge of the lake, this stretches up particularly high into some mountain ranges, whereas on the western edge the land raises more modestly into surrounding hills. This means that the majority of cities and settlements are on the western side of the lake.

So when we read of Jesus "crossing the lake," for a moment of gathering or ministry, this is almost always crossing from the western cities to the eastern mountains, and then Jesus "crosses back across the lake" to return to the western cities. Indeed, that is what has happened leading up to our scripture passage this morning!

This moment begins when Jesus hears of the death of John the Baptist, at which point the grieving Jesus "withdrew by boat privately to solitary place" in verse 13. Jesus goes eastward across the lake towards the mountains on the other side, but he's followed by large crowds of people, and Jesus offers healing and then feeds them with the miracle of loaves and fish, feeding five thousand men and thousands more women and children from just five loaves of bread and two fish. And then, at the start of this morning's scripture passage, we read in verses 22 and 23: "Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray." So Jesus has sent the disciples to go back across the lake on boat towards the western cities, while he prays on a mountainside on the eastern side of the lake.

Now as we approach this scene in scripture, there's another aspect of the Sea of Galilee to keep in mind. I mentioned that the Sea of Galilee is sort of sunken into the landscape, with hills climbing up on the west and mountains soaring up on the east. Part of what this means is that the Sea of Galilee and the region around is particularly prone to intense wind storms. During the heat of the day, the lake and surrounding landscape is usually pretty calm, not a whole lot of wind. But when night comes and the temperature drops, the cold air can come spilling down towards the warmer air over the lake, kicking up some really intense winds. So it's not surprising that the disciples encounter such a windstorm that night when they start to row back to the western cities!

And just one last part of the geography of this scene as we approach the passage, and that has to do with the moon. Now because the earth rotates eastward, the moon will always be seen to rise in the east and set in the west, just like the sun. So when the disciples are rowing in the boat, sitting facing the opposite direction as where they're

going, because they're facing forward and as they row the boat moves in the direction behind them, they're rowing both with the wind blowing against their backs and the moon behind them, because we're told it's getting close to dawn and the moon will be starting to set in the west.

Okay! So now we've got a pretty good understanding of the setting of this scene, so let's dive into what's happening here.

The disciples have been sent in the boat across the lake, and Jesus climbs up an eastern mountainside for some time to pray, and then when he's ready to return, he decides not to walk the long way around the lake but to take the shortcut across the lake, because hey, he's Jesus and he can walk right on the water!

So when Jesus starts walking across the lake it must be at least a couple hours since the disciples have started rowing across, so the fact that they're still at it must mean that they're really fighting against some strong wind, this is really tough rowing work to push against the wind across the lake. And again, not only have they been at it for hours, but just by walking, Jesus is pretty quickly able to catch up to them, so they're really struggling to make progress back to the western shores!

So let's put ourselves in the seat of the disciples' boat, next to them as they row. We're in our seats, facing east as we row, row, row our boat, trying to reach the western shores at our back. The wind is blowing hard against our backs, pushing against us as we try to row against us, fighting against us for each inch - we've been at this for hours, and we are *exhausted*. The moon is behind us as well, and in front of us we have the shimmering black of the lake's surface and the dark eastern mountainsides blotting out half the stars above the water's edge.

And then, amidst the howling wind at our backs, with sweat pouring down over aching muscles, in the darkest of pre-dawn night, it happens - this ethereal figure appears in the midst of the darkness. The moon is shining from behind us towards Jesus, so he emerges like a point of light in the darkness with the moon shining on him; the wind is blowing towards Jesus, so his robes are billowing out behind him, like flowing angels' wings.

And as we row on and on, pushing hard against the waves, this glowing figure in front of us is getting closer, closer, ever closer. With Jesus appearing amidst the roiling waves in front of us, we probably couldn't tell that he's walking on the water, he would instead seem to be gliding over the water towards us, billowing and shining.

We can perhaps understand where these disciples are coming from when they cry out in verse 26, "It's a ghost!"

And then Jesus offers words of comfort, words the disciples can hardly believe: "Take courage, it is I!" they hear in Jesus's familiar voice, "Don't be afraid." And then this wonderful moment when Peter tells Jesus to call him out to the water, and Jesus does, and lo and behold Peter starts walking on the water! Until the wind catches his attention, and his fear creeps up, and his feet sink start sinking down into the water.

I think we can hear Jesus chuckling between the lines of the text when Jesus picks Peter up out of the water, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

And when Jesus and Peter climb together into the disciples' boat, the winds miraculously dissipated - winds which, on the Sea of Galilee, shouldn't calm down until the morning temperatures start to rise. And with Jesus on board, on these now still waters, the disciples make it Gennesaret on the northwestern shore.

So what would the disciples have taken from this experience, and what can we draw from it as well?

Well that moment of Jesus emerging like a billowing point of light in the darkness - that rings as true metaphorically as it does literally, doesn't it? In those moments of darkest night, when we're struggling against the screaming winds of life's circumstances, when we're straining against the waves - that's right when Jesus is walking towards us, knocking at the door.

And when Jesus arrives, he brings comfort and joy - they share a moment of laughter at Peter's mishap, the water calm down, and they make their way easily to the western shore. And again, this rings true in our lives too, doesn't it? When we invite Jesus in, when we receive Jesus in, the way becomes just a bit easier, doesn't it? We might still be rowing hard at the oars, but maybe we find the wind isn't so hard against our back anymore. Like Jesus says, says a few chapters earlier in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in my heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

And so let us remember those lessons as well, friends. When the going gets tough, let us look on the horizon for Jesus coming near to us, even in seemingly impossible circumstances. And let us welcome in Jesus, invite him into the boat to calm the waters and travel with us safely to shore.