

## Matthew 14 What's the point?

This passage from Matthew is a very familiar one; it forms the basis of many paintings depicting a storm swept sea, Jesus walking on the water and Peter outside the boat but sinking into the water. Many sermons and commentaries are formed along one of two lines: encouraging us to keep our eyes on Jesus and get out of the boat, or condemning Peter for his lack of faith. And both of these approaches are clearly supported by the text and are legitimate expositions of messages. Both views are in the nature of good advice, but is that all that is available to us from them. What is the point for Matthew of including this story in his narrative? We have taken from the narrative the expression “walking on water” to indicate a person with extraordinary talents or abilities. This story is preceded by the feeding of the multitude after healing all those brought to him there. It is also followed by a summary of more healing. In all three narratives, the crowd plays a significant role. Jesus has gained popularity as a man who can heal whatever ails a person. This news has spread beyond the Galilean borders and crowds consisting of the infirm and their caregivers and friends as well as curious, fascinated and antagonistic fans show up. Jesus, having been rejected in Nazareth and having heard of John the Baptist’s beheading wishes to withdraw from the crowd to grieve and to attend to some self help. The disciples, seeing the crowd, urge Jesus to dismiss them, but he compassionately sacrifices self-care to attend to the crowds. After the healing and feeding, Jesus again desires to take some time away, this time not only from the crowds but also the disciples. He first sends the disciples away in a boat, alone across the lake before nightfall. The text says that Jesus made the disciples get into the boat. A better literal translation for made would be “to force” or “to compel”. Jesus did not give the disciples a choice to remain with him; to leave him alone with the crowd and take the boat they arrived in away. Seemingly this leaves Jesus without transport. Jesus then dismisses the crowd—the verb here contains no compulsion but suggests release in the sending away. What is the point of all this—so that Jesus could be alone? What Jesus does is go up the mountain by himself. In Matthew the mountain is a place for encountering God. Twice the text tells us that Jesus is there alone; he has gone alone to a mountain for his rendezvous with the Father. Jesus stays on the mountain to pray. We often already jump to the plight of the disciples in that boat, but before we get to that, there is something which is even more powerful and miraculous that Jesus does. One verse in the story tells us that Jesus is sitting in silence, in the evening, offering his prayers to God. Before anything that happens on the water, Jesus retreats by himself to be in communion with his Father in heaven. The mountain, consistently the place where so many holy things occur, is where Jesus retreats to gain direction, focus and peace. Barbara Brown Taylor has written a book entitled, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. In this book she speaks of how often we associate the dark with bad things, but points out God created both light and dark. She points out that God is present in the dark as well. As part of her research into this idea, she takes a blanket out at night and lays down in the yard and settles in to watch the sky turn dark and wait for the stars to appear. As she lays there, she begins to feel a sense of guilt—after all she is not doing anything productive, useful, or even moderately active while lying there. Even though the sun is going down; there’s still tasks awaiting her. Her spinning mind convinces her it’s time to go

and do something more useful. The moon and star will have to wait until another night. Lying in the dark, practicing the quiet, listening to the sound of silence, paying attention to God takes practice. Her book is an exercise in walking in the dark, learning to find comfort and peace in the dark and silence. But that takes practice. It doesn't come naturally to sit still and wait. We shouldn't be surprised that Jesus withdraws to find time alone in prayer because he does so many times in his ministry. But we're all a lot like Barbara Brown Taylor, when it comes to the quiet. Places of solitude stand before us, ready to receive us, but we are distracted by the noise of our days. We choose instead to fill our silence with productivity. We often fill the quiet with anything but time alone with God. Or if we try to find time for quiet, the distractions and noise of our world find ways of creeping back into our minds, disrupting the silence and our prayers. It doesn't come naturally to us to sit still in silence, but how else are we to listen for God's guidance and feel God's presence? There was a popular song by Simon and Garfunkel called *The Sound of Silence*. The opening line is "Hello darkness, my old friend." This is what I imagine Jesus saying as he makes his way up that mountain that night. Scripture says, "when evening came, Jesus was there alone." After being surrounded by crowds and before the sound of the wind and waves intrude, Jesus remains in silence, in communion with God. And he doesn't return to the disciples until almost dawn. Therefore, Jesus is alone, in the quiet, presumably all night. We might wonder what Jesus would have prayed in that silence. Was he praying for the hungry crowd that found him on the hillside? Was he lifting up the hundreds who needed healing from sickness and mental health? Was Jesus looking to God for clarity in his teaching, already exhausted from his efforts at explaining God's law, justice and mercy? Or was he lifting up his disciples, those closest to him, who still seemed so clueless and unable to understand his ministry? Or was he saying anything at all, preferring in the silence to listen: listen for a Word from God, for direction, for comfort, for any number of things God might say?

Whatever words were or were not coming out of Jesus' mouth, the point is that Jesus drew away. He pulled away from everyone and spent all night in silence and quiet in order to draw closer to the one who sent him. The sound of his silence was the powerful sound of a man in prayer. This passage about Jesus walking on water is often considered a story about the life of faith. Life can indeed feel like a chaotic storm, tossing our boats in every direction. Scholars often compare the story of the frightened disciples to our struggles with faith where the wind and waves represent the chaotic moments of life that challenge our faith and test our strength.

If this story is about a life of faith, then it seems important to consider what this passage says about prayer. Our world is in desperate need of prayer, serious prayer, from those who earnestly desire for God's grace to intervene in so many situations. In Israel and Palestine, so filled with explosions and tragedies, in Syria and other countries so filled with war, violence and hatred, Sudan, Venezuela, and so many countries--really too many to name--there is need for prayers for peace. Many countries in West Africa, who struggle with famine, disease and fear, desperately need our prayers for justice and mercy. The racial, ethnic and religious tensions that lie behind many of this world's wars and terror call for us to pray for justice and mercy. Those same tensions and prejudices also exist close to home and need our prayerful listening to the messages you would have us hear. We have members of our own community and nearby places, church members and friends, who struggle with grief, diagnoses and family strife that

need our prayers for comfort and guidance. The tragedies of our world beg for us to retreat and be in prayer with God. Whether we sit together with others or find mountaintops or shorelines of silence, we are called to retreat into prayer. Miracles do not happen without committed time with God, sharing our deepest needs with the one who loves us most. The point of this narrative; the miracle in today's text is not that Jesus walked on water—of course, God can walk upon the waters that God created. Our focus, instead, is that Jesus came to be with the disciples—in their fear, in their anxiety, having already spent time alone in prayer himself. He came to them over the water in their need. And that is the second miracle in this narrative: after being in communion with God he came to them. And he comes to us, as we all seek peace in the midst of storms and noise. Jesus calls to us over the storms and tells us to take heart. He stretches his hand out to lift us as he lifted Peter from the water. The miracle is that God desires us to come in prayer, to listen in silence, to seek guidance and lift our hearts to God so that we may find peace and be saved as we go forward with God's presence and guidance. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.