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Proper 14-A, Matthew 14:22-33, delivered 8/7/2005

Water as a symbol often signifies new life, birth. Remember High School English and think of Helen Keller spelling "water" to Annie Sullivan in the *Miracle Worker*. It meant communication and life. That does not even begin to describe the Christian tradition of water as used in Baptism. But water was not always an easily accessible, amniotically over-toned, forgiving, cleansing symbol. In most ancient creation accounts in the middle and near east, water held a different sort of meaning altogether. The simple chemical equation of 2 parts Hydrogen and 1 part Oxygen often represented chaos. Instead of a refreshing bath of clean, clear, life-giving water, they saw the raging sea, full of un-thirst-quenching, huge wave producing, salty, briny anarchy.

From *Genesis*, in our Biblical tradition, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." In other words, before creation, before God acted, there was only sea darkness, no land. Likewise, Egypt's cosmology starts, "In the beginning there was only the watery chaos, called Nu." In Babylon, life began with a couple, a male and female. The female was a dragon called Tiamat, represented by nothing other than chaotic, swirling salt water (*Enuma Elish*). Life began in chaos, and that chaos was often represented by water.

For some theologians and psychologists, that swirling water is often viewed as a projection of something within humanity. They claim that it represents our own sense of turmoil, our mistakes, confusion, our frailties writ large. In this view, the breaking waves equal broken humans. Ancient people developed the mythical stories of squalling seas as an expression of the darkness within all of us.

Bear that in mind as we look at the Gospel. In the account from Matthew this morning, we hear of Jesus trying to find the disciples in the early morning after he has been at prayer. But the disciples are in a boat, on choppy, drifting waters, far away from their leader. Jesus goes to them, even on the sea, but instead of taking a sea worthy, wave-riding vessel, he uses his own buoyancy-defying principles and walks on the windy water to find his friends. Jesus does not need a rowboat. It is not that he is a super-hero with extraordinary powers. That is not the point of the story. The meaning is more taken from those ancient accounts of "The beginning." It is that Jesus is the new Creation, a new type of creation, one that does not come from bedlam and confusion but instead teaches how to walk above the rippling chaos that does exist in our world. He offers the dry and high road. Instead of just vanquishing chaos altogether, his life producing way, truth, and life just naturally seem to rise above it.

At first, the Disciples are afraid. In their hazy, pre-dawn eye-rubbing glimpses of their savior walking on rough waters, they think that he is an apparition. But Jesus tells them who he is. They are calmed, and Peter asks Jesus to command him to walk on the water as well. Peter, whether he understands the significance or not, is really seeking a great deal more than just miraculous powers. He is asking Jesus to teach him how to navigate the pain and chaos of life. Peter is seeking wisdom, and Jesus offers this new creation, the ability to stand in the midst of tumult and rise above it. So Jesus says to Peter, "Come."

In other words, learn how to be in the world in a new way. And Peter gets up on shaky, wobbly legs and begins to amble toward Jesus, managing the sea within and without. Suddenly, though, as quickly as he began, Peter's water walking ends. A strong wind blows. Fear takes over, and Peter begins to sink. He is not yet capable of managing chaos without sinking into it. Jesus saves him, then speaks the familiar words, "You of little faith; why did you doubt?"

For years, people have been using those words to claim that if Peter had not doubted Jesus' role as Messiah, he could have walked on the water. If Peter really believed the Nicene Creed or had recited the catechism, he too could have walked. But I do not believe that what Jesus says is that simple, and as a good Episcopalian, I believe that doubt has a very important place in belief. Jesus is not saying, "Why don't you believe in me as God?" He is explaining, "You don't seem to understand what following me as God entails. It involves walking above chaos, not sinking into it or even fighting it." That is what Jesus wants Peter to trust: this new way of life.

But what does that mean? Doesn't it seem arrogant to assume that we could rise above the chaos of life when it is floating all around us. And what does floating above the chaos of life entail for us in modern life? The answer, I believe, can be found in the cryptic passage we heard from Paul's Letter to the Romans. Paul writes, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh." Paul is in inner turmoil; He is confused about how to be both a follower of Christ and Jewish. Before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he persecuted Christians. Now, as a Christian, should he persecute Jews? Paul is torn and sinking into mire. But after Paul encounters the peace of Jesus, he is no longer interested in playing the same school boy games of retaliation. He does not just switch from one boat to another. He is learning to walk on water and ultimately decides as a Christian to support who the Jews are. He is going to follow Christ, but that does not negate his Jewishness or the relationship of the Jews to God.

Paul refuses to make the chosen people an outcast, even if he feels that part of that chosen group made an outcast out of his savior by turning him over to the Romans. If only Christians centuries later would dwell upon those words for inspiration in interfaith relationships. This is the buoyancy of Christ, learning to walk in and around and amongst the world, even feeling it, but rising above the anger, malevolence, and pain that can drown us in our sorrows.

In other words, when we demonize others, even our enemies, we sink. When we label people or countries or even political parties as evil and of no use, we take water into our lungs instead of air. When we fail to see our common humanity in any person, place or thing, we lose our buoyancy. We fall into the same cycles of pain, tribulation, and despair that were represented by raging waters thousands of years ago. Paul and Jesus provide anti-sinking salvation. They show us that only by caring for all involved, only by saying, "Forgive them, they know not what they do," even from a cross, do we ever learn to navigate chaos. Only by taking those steps can we learn how to follow Jesus. Only then can we say that we know what faith is and concerns.

Jesus reaches out to Peter and saves him when Peter begins to sink. So shall Jesus do for us when we fall into the moist disarray that can be Creation. But ultimately, the new creation is not only Jesus. It is also us, our relationships with one another, our country, our world. Our faith, is

what we do with those entities, more than some set of beliefs. Faith is when we forgive one another, refuse to demonize others, and make sure that conflicts are used to deepen our care for one another, not tear us apart. Jesus, in his wisdom, did not split the waters for the disciples so that they could walk on dry land like his predecessor Moses. He let them instead, learn to walk on water, and by doing that, he taught us as well. Like for Peter, that is often not an easy, one-shot endeavor for any of us. But, if we choose, again and again, in little steps to follow the ways of water walking and life giving, we can trust that we are making the same wet, buoyant footprints as our God.