

Scripture: Psalm 69:1-3, Matthew 8:23-27; 14:22-33

Psalm 69:1-3 - Prayer for Deliverance from Persecution

To the leader: according to Lilies. Of David.

¹ Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
² I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.
³ I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.

Matthew 8:23-27 - Jesus Stills the Storm

²³ And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴ A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. ²⁵ And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" ²⁶ And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. ²⁷ They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

Matthew 14:22-33 - Jesus Walks on the Water

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

It's Hard Not to Write Satire

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Kerra Becker English

Way back in my seminary days, there were “those students” who took the time to read the footnotes. However, I was doing all I could to keep up with the bulky reading assignments as it was. I couldn't be bothered with someone addressing some obscure point from a lengthy footnote found on page 257 of stuffy and WORDY theologians like Karl Barth. So today, I can hardly believe I'm going to start this sermon with a path I ended up on because of a footnote.

For this round through of preaching Matthew's gospel, I've had a consistent companion voice in my head, Warren Carter. Carter's book on “Matthew and Empire” has been eye-opening, and I bought the book primarily because his footnotes in the study Bible that I use are also key to understanding the text in ways that I haven't known it before.

Matthew's gospel is written around 80 AD knowing the impacts of the first Jewish-Roman war, a rebellion started to protest Rome's control over Jewish life and culture in Judea. Many Jewish towns and cultural artifacts were destroyed during that time, including the Temple which was demolished to the ground in 70 AD. Carter proposes that the culture of the time greatly influenced HOW the gospel writer understood and wrote about Jesus' religious revolution. Rightfully so. In some ways we all re-make our image of Jesus, the living Christ, according to whatever era we find ourselves in – even though the historical Jesus lived and walked among humanity in a particular time and space.

Carter makes an astute observation that throughout the book, Matthew is repeatedly telling his contemporary audience the difference between Roman authority and Jesus' authority. Using the

emperor's title "Son of God" was a cheeky way of talking about Jesus. Some Galilean Jewish nobody wasn't about to be the Son of God by any stretch of the Roman imagination. And any, ANY comparison to the power that the emperor claimed to hold would be seen as making a ridiculous leap – except if you were sympathetic to the Jewish rebellion and its desire to be free.

Which brings me to the obscure footnote Carter plants this time. In this bold move of Matthew telling us that Jesus can walk on water – one can also read another strike against the ruling emperor. Imperial propaganda at the time frequently claimed that the supreme leader was "ruler of lands, and seas, and nations." If Jesus can control the sea – it is a "godlike" thing, and the only human that was supposed to have such power was the one who was believed to hold ALL the worldly power.

So, the scholarly question is – how does Carter presume all this? One of his sources, [warning: footnote ahead] is Juvenal's Satires. Juvenal wrote his poetry a few decades after Matthew, but with a similarity. He used humor and odd juxtapositions to indicate the flagrant misdeeds of the Empire. If you are going to talk trash about the ruling class, it's probably best to do it slant. Tell the story of your Savior so that the religious message of speaking truth to power is told – but don't be so brazen as to get yourself killed. Or couch your message within satirical poetry, as a comedy show – that makes the point – but can also be shrugged off for getting a good laugh.

This observation sent me hunting for the Satires, and trust me when I tell you I was NOT disappointed. Juvenal's satires begin with the line, "It's hard to not write satire, for who is so tolerant of the Unjust city, so steeled, that he can restrain himself?" Desperate times seem to call for a dark sense of humor, and it feels to me like we are living in a similar moment. If you are familiar with satirical websites like *The Onion* or in Virginia, *The Piedmont*; if you watch comedic news shows run by personalities like John Oliver, Stephen Colbert, and Trevor Noah -

maybe Hasan Minaj if you are in a younger set than I am, THESE are direct descendants of Juvenal's style and poetic function in society. Juvenal quotes this familiar (at the time) line of propaganda about "the ruler of lands, seas, and nations" to then ask the question about those who comfort themselves by being quiet when close to such a seat of power, asking, "What's more deaf than the ears of a tyrant?"

This story about Jesus walking on water is told in three of the four gospels, only Luke fails to mention it. It is a repeated miracle story, a story told to identify Jesus with the power of God in our world that we define by human limitations. It is also a story told by Matthew specifically to contest the Roman Emperor's claim of vast and unscrupulous worldly power AND to put Jesus in line with Moses as the one who frees the Jews from unjust rule and slavery toward God's promise of land, and hope, and their own national identity.

Jesus, in this text, is demonstrating power differently, much differently. Sometimes it helps for us to walk the text back into its own time and place to see how it was used then as a story to speak into the context of the day. The Emperor may be the "ruler of lands, seas, and nations," but Jesus has control over the storms on the sea, and an ability to walk where no other human has been able to walk before. It's powerful rhetoric, meant to lift up those who were feeling powerless over their own life situations. It's a direct challenge to unjust rule. Even in the storm – Jesus can be the calming presence and a source of courage. When Jesus speaks to the fearful disciples who think they've seen a ghost, he says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

This calming, encouraging, hopeful message spans all 3 texts, but there's a piece that's different in Matthew's gospel, and it's one that, given his context, makes all the difference – I think. It's what happens with Peter. Peter wants to get out there with Jesus. Why exactly? I'm not sure we know, but he asks, and Jesus responds by saying, "Come." Then, Peter GETS OUT OF THE

BOAT. That's trust. That's conviction. Perhaps, that's a little bit of stupidity. Can we really go where Jesus goes, do what Jesus does? What kind of audacity does Peter have?

Well, we find out that Peter is OK for the first few seconds - until the storm kicks up a bit. A strong wind makes walking on water seem impossible again and he starts to sink. Immediately he cries out, "Lord, save me!" Then Jesus reaches out his hand, catches him, and chastises him for his less than stellar performance. If Jesus is the one leading us away from tyranny and into freedom, we want to be on that boat with him, we may even want to be out on the water with him – but I admit that I can be like Peter – it's scary out there when the wind kicks up. I'm usually one of the first ones to get seasick when the boat starts to rock, so there's that too. But by honoring Peter's request - Jesus lets us know that we DO have the ability to go where he goes, to do what he does, to see through what seems impossible in our own context. Come to him and we can come face to face with the power of God. Oh, there will be times when that power terrifies us. We are told all the time that we aren't meant to walk on water. We are told exactly who the people are who rule lands, and seas, and nations – and we aren't it. Our national leaders jockey for God's favor and blessing, but little do they realize that God's favor and blessing are as close as the invitation Jesus speaks to Peter through Matthew and then to us. Yes, it may be stormy, it may seem impossible, it may feel awkward and dumb to step out of a perfectly good boat, but Jesus says, "Come to me."

It's easier to bend to worldly power than to contest it. It is oh-so-familiar, and it can feel more like home than like the prison that it is. We want Jesus to reach out his hand and save us from our drowning. That safety net is there. Jesus doesn't abandon Peter, and he won't abandon us. And yet, his words to Peter get me right in the heart as well. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When we are in the difficult times of life, the discomfort, the conflict, the pain – trusting

God seems an awful lot like being invited to step out of the boat. If we leave our woundedness behind, what will we find in the unknown that is ahead of us? That leap is a tough one for all of us. Peter failed the test, or maybe he passed the test – in the most human of ways.

Then, when they got in the boat together, the wind ceased. Those in the boat worshiped, and by that I think it means they were struck with awe, silenced by what they had just seen, and maybe only later were able to make the statement we find Matthew to be known for in his telling of the Jesus story, “Truly you are the Son of God.” This isn’t the Emperor’s power. This is God’s power – for real. Trust in the power of God, even in the storm, even in the impossible, when your faith seems bold, or when doubt is all you know. That is the purpose of this story – to claim God’s power, the power that, oddly enough, is always more than enough for everyone. Amen.