

Participating with God's work in the neighbourhood and world

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 13 August 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Karina Kreminski

Pentecost 11A

Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14: 22-33

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

The visual presented in the story from the Gospel of Matthew about Jesus walking on water has captured the attention of our culture. It's become a part of our vernacular. To exclaim that someone is "*walking on water*" usually means that they are performing an extraordinary act or that they are an extraordinary person. In this story Jesus comes across like a magician, someone who can perform magic tricks to astound and dazzle people.

I have read this story and often think to myself why did Jesus do this? Why did he walk on water? It's a little, well, showy isn't it? Is it a trick? What's the point? I don't know what questions come to your mind as you hear this familiar story again. I tried to discern and hear this story from a fresh perspective this week as I was reflecting on it in preparation for today.

Just before this story, Jesus has fed the 5,000. Another miraculous and surprising story. He has gathered quite a crowd due to his teaching. After this he dismisses them and also dismisses the disciples. He goes to a mountaintop and spends the night in prayer. He is alone. When he finishes he gets up and goes to where the disciples are on a boat on the other side of the lake. And it's windy. And this is where we read that Jesus walks on the water in the midst of the winds and waves. He appears to the disciples walking towards them and understandably they are frightened thinking they are seeing a ghost. Jesus comforts them by saying don't be afraid it is I.

And then the second part of this story is that the disciple Peter says if it's you Jesus I want to step out and walk with you on the water. Again, surprisingly, Jesus says yes and Peter begins to walk on the water. But then just as Peter is getting started he notices the winds and waves and he becomes afraid and so begins to sink. Jesus reaches out to him and says: *you of little faith why did you doubt?* Like a child who is still learning how to walk Jesus full of compassion supports Peter in his moment of weakness and puts him back onto his feet.

I love many things about this passage. One of the things I love is that when Peter asks Jesus if he too can walk on the water, Jesus says yes. I mean that's not really something that we might expect. Often the interpretation of this passage is that the reason that Jesus walked on the water is to prove that he was indeed without doubt the son of God. And that might be true. But if you are trying to display your uniqueness then why would you invite others to do what only you are capable of doing? As I read this passage again this week and reflected on it what came to mind is not so much that Jesus walked on the water to prove his uniqueness but that Jesus walked on the water to invite others to do what he was doing.

What if this passage is about Jesus' invitation to us to participate in his miraculous work? What if the whole reason that Jesus did this "magician's trick" was to invite others to join with his identity and work?

The wonderful and enchanting thing about this story is that Jesus is inviting us to participate in the work that he is doing. What is the work that God is doing in this church and in our world that we can participate in? We need eyes to see what God is up to in our midst. Sometimes it's not so easy to discern. Like the disciples who saw Jesus walking on water and mistook him for a ghost, sometimes we too can find it hard to see the surprising work that God is doing right under our noses. Do we have eyes to see the work that God is doing among us and in our world? Sometimes God's work can look miraculous, other times the miraculous is hidden in the most ordinary of things.

In this story Jesus is presented as the one who has the attention of the wind and the waves. Creation listens to and participates with Jesus. I think there is a call here for us today to discern God in creation - and work with God. We have been given the task of taking care of creation, not dominating it or controlling or subduing it but rather to be caretakers.

Can we see God at work today in nature and creation? Of course we are all aware about the dangers of climate change. We see unseasonably warm or cold weather around the world. More natural disasters and pandemics occurring. The extinction of species including the threat of our own extinction. There is a real anxiety around climate change today. So how can we work with God to care for nature, creation and our environment? What does this look like for Pitt St Uniting to engage with God in the work of caring for our creation and climate?

What I also find surprising in this passage is the faith that Jesus places in us. We often rightly talk about having faith in God. However I think this passage speaks to us also about the faith that God has in us. Again instead of the focus being only on Jesus, the attention turns, in the second part of this passage, to Peter, an ordinary human being with all of his bumbling and hot headedness. Peter was often putting his foot in his mouth. And this time you'd think he's done it again. Boldly asking for something that he should not be asking for. Like when the disciples at one stage asked to be seated at the right hand of God when Jesus comes into his glory. Awkward moment. But this time, Jesus responds in the affirmative, berating Peter for his boldness but affirming him. Stretching out his hands for Peter to take and calling him to do what Jesus was doing. To participate with him. And so Peter miraculously begins to walk on water.

Have you ever considered that God has faith in us? God calls us to discern the work God is doing and has faith that we will do that work. What is the work that God has called us to do in this church, our neighbourhoods and our world? There is an invitation here to not so much work for God but rather work with God, participate in the mission of God of reconciliation and restoration of a messed up world that still contains the traces and beauty of God's grace. We are called to speak and embody the good news of the gospel in a world that needs to recover wonder, enchantment and hope. Many in our neighbourhoods and world are longing for something more in a world that seems a little flat.

A while ago I read a book called Enchantment written by Katherine May who does not identify as a Christian. The book has been very popular. She writes about her struggle to find that something dear in life. The quote's a bit long but I'll read it in full because I think she beautifully captures the longing that many feel today.

"This life I have made is too small. It doesn't allow enough in: enough ideas, enough beliefs, enough encounters with the exuberant magic of existence. I have been so keen to deny it, to veer deliberately towards the rational, to cling solely to the experiences that are directly observable by others. Only now, when everything is taken away, can I see what a folly this is. I don't want that life anymore. I want what [the] ancients had: to be able to talk to god.

Not in a personal sense, to a distant figure who is unfathomably wise, but to have a direct encounter with the flow of things, a communication without words. I want to let something break in me, some dam that has been shoring up this shamefully atavistic sense of the magic behind all things, the tingle of intelligence that was always waiting for me when I came to tap in.

I want to feel that raw, elemental awe that my ancestors felt, rather than my tame, explained modern version. I want to prise open the confines of my skull and let in a flood of light and air and mystery... I want to retain what the quiet reveals, the small voices whose whispers can be heard only when everything falls silent." ⁱ

God has faith in us to reenchant this world.

What we must do with this faith God has in us is have courage that God is with us. Unlike Peter, looking to the wind and waves, we look to the one who calls us in faith to participate with God in the work of the restoration of our world. And that is not an easy thing to do. We live in an age of anxiety. As I mentioned before there is anxiety about the state of the planet. There is now an official term *climate anxiety* and there are climate psychologists to help us work through that anxiety.

In our faith community in Surry Hills we are holding a workshop on climate anxiety in October at the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre led by an academic who has written a book on the topic. We are doing this because there is a need in our neighbourhood for safe places where people can talk about their fears about the future. How do we maintain courage and hope in this anxiety without focusing on the troubles of the time and letting them overwhelm us like wild waves in the ocean. There are other anxieties of our time also of course. We could name many.

Sometimes there is the anxiety of the church. We hear about the decline of the church, we talk about the death of the church. We worry about what the future of the church looks like. Often this moves us to try to control this desperate situation by talking about numbers and growth and plans and strategies to fix the problem. We act, sometimes, as though we are not a people of death and resurrection. Again this is a situation where we need to hear that God has faith in us and God calls us to participate with God in the work that we discern God is up to in our neighbourhoods and the world.

Sometimes we forget that it is God's church and that God invites us to work with God in God's church. We are asked to be courageous at this time. Even in the midst of talk of decline and death. We are asked to be as courageous as Peter walking out of the boat onto the water. This is a risky work, a surprising work and work that calls us to discern what God is up to. It is a time for new things to try things that seem out of the box and even unbelievable or impossible. God, I think, is asking us to dream. What are the dreams and new things that God has for Pitt St Uniting in a world that desperately needs good news?

And I think the very encouraging thing is that we are not left alone. When we fail - and we will fail because we are human - there is no judgment or berating from God, Instead like Jesus, God stretches out this hand and like a supportive friend tells us not to doubt but to have faith; not to look to the wind and waves but to look to God.

I love this compassion of God. We are not abandoned, but instead held in the grip of God's hand as we participate with God on that mission. So we are given permission to ask, to try, to fail and to get up again and try again to participate with God in the new work we are called to do if we have eyes to see it.

Missiologist Alan Roxburgh calls it the great unravelling - the new things that God is doing in the church will create an unravelling and a decluttering. Do we have eyes to see what the Spirit is doing? None of this is easy or quick or even achievable in our lifetime. Thank God we are called to have a bigger perspective. I am reminded of this encouragement attributed to the priest Oscar Romero. ⁱⁱ

A Future Not Our Own (attributed to Oscar Romero)

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
It is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete,
Which is another way of saying that
The Kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that should be said.
No prayer fully expressed our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
Knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produced effects far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything,
And there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
A step along the way,
An opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results,
But that is the difference
Between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
Ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future that is not our own.*

I'll end with this encouragement by Kate Tristram: ⁱⁱⁱ

Our Bible sets before us the idea that God may use a minority to serve the majority. Church history says the same. It is because of the faithfulness of the few, not the many, that the Christian faith has come down the ages to us and we have the chance to know God in this way. It has always been so. If God has called us and we want to respond to him, then we must be faithful to our own vision, whatever the many think. But we must do it with open hearts and open arms, not safeguarding our fewness, our specialness. And we must do this in healthy laughter directed at ourselves, because really it is so ridiculous to think that God has chosen us for anything at all, even though it is true.

ⁱ <https://www.booktopia.com.au/enchantment-katherine-may/book/9780571378340.html#:~:text=Paperback&text=From%20the%20internationally%20bestselling%20author,around%20us%2C%20all%20the%20time>.

ⁱⁱ <https://trinitylutherangb.org/prayer-archbishop-oscar-romero/#:~:text=But%20there%20it%20is.,to%20which%20God%20is%20calling!>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theoldie.co.uk/blog/pearls-of-wisdom-from-kate-tristram>