

WPC
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Weathering the Storm
Mark 6:45-52; Matthew 14:22-33

Chances are that if you've heard the name Douglas Adams, it's because you've read his series of books called "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." However, there's another Douglas Adams who was a Professor of Christianity at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA until his death in 2007. The way this Douglas Adams sees it, there's a difference between stories that parents tell about their own childhoods and stories that *grandparents* tell about those same years: "Parents tend to clean up their [life] stories [a bit]; grandparents [are great to have around because they] tell stories that are more truthful and have [some] rough edges." (Douglas Adams, The Prostitute in the Family Tree, 1). Adams tells the following story to illustrate the difference:

In the second grade, a young boy played baseball with the Pee Wee League before he grew up to play Little League ball. His next-door neighbor was the coach. This little boy was fascinated by a stopwatch the coach carried to time plays; and he saw a lot of that stopwatch, because during weekend games he was usually next to the coach on the bench. After

practice sessions during the week, the coach and his wife often invited the team into their home to eat ice cream and watch tv.

On one of these occasions, the coach and his wife were called away and asked the little boy to lock up the house when the others had gone. After finishing off the ice cream and turning off the television, he noticed the stopwatch on the dining room table, so he went over, picked it up, and began pushing the buttons. The dials went around and around. Then it was time to leave, so he put the stopwatch in his pocket and went home.

The trouble with stealing a stopwatch is that it's a social instrument: One needs to time someone else. The little boy kept the watch in his pocket all week long until the baseball game on Saturday; then, in the midst of a big play, he pulled it out of his pocket to time the action. Sitting right next to the coach, he was exposed as a thief.

That night, the father called the boy in for a talk with him. The boy's grandfather was also present. He began by saying, "Son, you have ruined your life!" (The boy was only in the second grade, but parents [can unfortunately] give you the impression [at times] that once you fail your life is at an end.) He went on to say, "You might be forgiven once; but if you ever steal again, you will be branded a thief for life. Then you will never be

the doctor or lawyer I hoped you would be.” He turned to the grandfather and said, “You tell him how serious this is.”

The grandfather leaned back and said, “It is pretty serious. Of course, it could have been worse, like the time your father stole the Johnsons’ boat up at the lake. It took me two days to get him out of jail. Or there was the time your father and his friends were graduating from high school and rented a cottage on the edge of town; they all got drunk, wrecked the place, and landed in jail again. And the third time your father was in jail—“

*The father interrupted, saying, “I think we have talked enough about this.” (Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree*, p.2-3)*

I believe that in this story of Jesus walking on the water, we may have an example of a parent story in Mark’s Gospel and a grandparent story in Matthew’s Gospel. Church tradition states that the Gospel of Mark is an example of Peter’s preaching, since Mark was a disciple of Peter. Mark includes the story about Jesus coming across the sea and calming the storm, but omits this embarrassing incident involving Peter.

The story about Peter’s brief walk on the water, and his glub, glub, glub thereafter, appears only in Matthew, which at least makes me wonder if Peter had been a little reluctant to share that particular detail with Mark.

...At any rate, I once preached on this passage when I lived in New Jersey a number of years ago. At the time, I thought this story was first and foremost a story about faith. And if it is, then Peter, in the end, clearly doesn't have enough. Peter recklessly ventures forth from the boat, but when he notices the wind gusting and the waves crashing, he loses focus, and then Simon, nicknamed Peter (the Rock), begins to sink like one.

If only Peter had just kept focused on Jesus and not the storm. If he had just had more faith, then his fear might not have dragged him under. That's what I'd always been taught, and it's what I'd always thought. But Barbara Brown Taylor raises a fascinating point on this passage in one of her commentaries. Here's what she says: there's "a peculiar thing Peter says at the beginning of the story that makes me doubt his motives. Once Jesus has appeared on the sea, walking toward the disciples, and has assured them that it is he, Peter says, 'Lord, **if it is you**, command me to come to you on the water.' He doubts Jesus, in other words, [before he ever gets out of the boat]. He doubts Jesus is who he says he is and demands proof of his identity, using the very same phrase the devil used when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness: 'If you are the son of God...' Do this thing, then this, then this." (Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels, 120)

“Jesus would have been utterly justified in saying, ‘Peter, sit down and shut up. You’re embarrassing yourself. You’re nobody special, just another beloved disciple. Forget the heroics and get back in the boat.’ (William Willimon, “Pulpit Resource”, 8-11-02, p. 27) But Jesus doesn’t do that, because he knows what Peter really needs is “a couple of steps on the water (to cure his doubt) and then a nose full of sea water (to cure his pomposity).” (Taylor, 121)

Notice what Peter cries out when he begins to sink: “Lord, save me!” He wasn’t in any doubt who Jesus was when the sea gave way beneath him. He knows Jesus is both Lord and Savior. “Maybe that was all that Jesus needed to hear from him all along, not ‘Here I am, Super Christian, on my way to you!’ but simply, ‘Lord, save me! I’m sinking. What am I doing out here? Save me, like you would anybody else who’s going down for the third time.” (Willimon, 27).

And Jesus does. He reaches out his hand and saves Peter, saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” That stinging rebuke is usually understood as Jesus’ judgment on Peter’s sinking, but maybe Peter’s error was in making that demand of Jesus in the first place: “Lord, *if it is you*, command me to come to you on the water.”

I realize most of us today phrase the challenge a bit differently. But it sounds familiar in a way, doesn't it? Lord, *if* it is you, grant me this job, give me this house, let me do well on my exam. Lord, *if* it is you, fix this, fix him, change her. Lord, *if* it is you, help me. Heal me *if* it is you. Give me a sign.

But what is the corollary of those kinds of statements? That if it's not all gotten, fixed, or healed, Jesus isn't Lord? ...Maybe that's the kind of doubt that gets us into trouble. After all – whether Peter sinks or swims (or, in this case, walks on water), God is God. And God is still God, and Jesus is still Lord, whether or not we get the signs, the stuff, or the results we want God to give us. Granted, it does take a nose full of sea water sometimes to drive the point home.

It's important to remember, though, that Jesus only rebukes Peter for his lack of faith. Peter's not the only guy in the boat, and there's no rebuke for the other eleven disciples, who had faith enough simply to stay put. Maybe faith, great faith, is that “calm, unheroic, but still impressive conviction that enables you to stay at your place in the boat, even though there's a storm, confident that you don't have to come to Jesus. In good time, he'll come to you.” (Willimon, 27)

He will come. And he does come. Just as he came to those frightened disciples without any particular heroics on their part. Just a lot of sitting and waiting in the same boat – confused, fearful, and rowing against the storm for much too long, as far as they were concerned! But what do you know – sure enough, Jesus showed up.

And that was when the wind finally stopped blowing. And those in the boat worshiped him saying, “Truly, you are the Son of God.” Amen.