

“The Wind Was Against Them”

Matthew 14:22-33

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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As I mentioned a moment ago, our topic today...is miracles.  
What do Presbyterians believe about miracles?

By the way, they don't teach classes on this topic in seminary.  
At least, they did not do so when I was there.

But I can tell you that I did have one seminary professor who was NOT afraid to share his own personal experience with the topic. I'm pretty sure that in every class he taught, he would eventually mention the time in his life when he and his wife were out for a drive and had a flat tire.

So they got out of the car, and he started to replace the tire.  
But something unexpected happened, don't remember how it happened.

I do remember him saying that the car fell on top of him.  
He was trapped. He couldn't move.  
Real quickly, the day had turned into a moment of life and death.

And then he described how his wife—this “very little woman,” he said—grabbed hold of the car, and somehow, inexplicably, lifted the car off of his body so that he could roll out from underneath.

She called for help.  
And his life was saved.

When she tried to lift the car later on, to duplicate the feat, if you will...she could not do it.

Is there a scientific explanation for such a thing?

There very may well be, I don't know.

What I do know is that this professor described the event as a miracle.

God's intervention that day helped his wife save his life.

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What do you believe saved his life that day?

- Was it some biological/scientific phenomena for which a divine explanation is completely unnecessary?
- Was it God's grace, giving his wife the strength she needed at the necessary moment to lift the car?
- Was it some combination of the two, something that we're never going to be able to untangle and shouldn't even try?

What do Presbyterians believe...when it comes to miracles?

Let's just lay out a few of the options.

- a. I've known plenty of Presbyterians who believe that every miracle described in the Bible happened exactly the way the Bible says that it happened. And that fits in Presbyterian theology.
- b. And I've known Presbyterians who may not believe every last detail of every miracle that the Bible describes—but they do believe God has the power to intervene in our lives today, just like God had that power back in biblical days.

- c. And I've known Presbyterians who read the miracle stories in scripture solely for their DEEPER meaning, focusing not on the historical accuracy of the text, but searching for the underlying message that is conveyed by the text.

And of course, I've known Presbyterians who believe some combination of these three options, all of which is fine and good...we cast a wide net when it comes to miracles in the Presbyterian Church.

Which means we can wrap up this sermon in 4 ½ minutes, which some of you will say is a miracle...

But as I make that list of answers to the question, I'm beginning to wonder if I'm searching for the wrong thing.

What do Presbyterians believe about miracles?

What's the best way to describe what happened to my seminary professor's wife on that roadside long ago?

How do we explain it?

I find myself on a search for answers, and yet...I wonder if answers are precisely the wrong thing to search for. What if we said that, for Presbyterians, when it comes to miracles, what's most important are QUESTIONS that we decide to ask.

For example, take our text for today.

Instead of asking:

Did it really happen this way?

ask this question:

**What does THIS story tell us about God?**

That's miracle question #1:

What does this story tell us about God?

You remember the text. Splendid text.

The disciples are in a boat on the sea,  
                     and the boat is being battered by the waves,  
                                     and the wind is against them.

In biblical stories, when you hear about water and a storm, think  
 CHAOS.

Why?

Because the sea, back in biblical days, was considered to be the  
 place where CHAOS reigned, the home where demons dwelled.

Do you remember the opening verses of the Bible?

*In the beginning, when...the earth was a formless void and  
 darkness covered the face of the deep...a wind from God swept over the  
 face of the waters...*

In other words, the Bible opens with God moving over the waters  
 to create ORDER out of DISORDER, to send light into the darkness and  
 the chaos...

In our text for today, there's the storm, the chaos, and then...  
                     the disciples see Jesus, walking on the water toward them.

But they don't know that it's Jesus.

They think it's a ghost.

They cry out in fear.

And Jesus says: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Pause right there.



This past June, the Reverend Dr. William Barber, II, retired from his position serving as pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, NC.

Barber had been at that church for the past 30 years. He's been a nationally known civil rights leader during his time there.

And Dr. Barber tells the story of how, when he first started out at Greenleaf, he didn't know if it would last.

A health crisis occurred in his life.

Dr. Barber, you see, suffers from ankylosing spondylitis, a very severe form of arthritis.

Back in 1993, he had only preached 4 sermons at what was then his new church, when he woke up one Friday morning in so much pain, he could NOT get out of bed.

An ambulance was called.  
He was taken to the hospital.  
The doctors didn't know what was going on.  
His condition was so bad, one of his legs was moving involuntarily from the pain.

He stayed in that hospital not days, not weeks, but months.  
His mental state deteriorated.  
He was angry. He was depressed.  
He had no idea what his future would hold.

One night in the hospital, he woke up, and was surprised to see an older lady in his room. It wasn't a nurse, it was a fellow patient. In a wheelchair. Both of her legs had been amputated.

This stranger said to him:

“My name is Ms. Watson. I came here to see you.  
They say you're in here pouting.”

“Ma'am,” Barber replied, “I don't want to talk with you.”

“Well, you can't go anywhere [right now],” she said, “but you've got work to do. Get over yourself. Go do what you're supposed to do!”

“Ma'am, I don't want to talk.”

“I'm going to pray for you,” Ms. Watson said.  
And she did. And then she left.

The next morning, Dr. Barber woke up, and he felt different.

He called the nurse, and he told her about Ms. Watson, and he said to the nurse that he really wanted to speak with Ms. Watson again. Would she mind finding her?

So the nurse went out to find Ms. Watson.

After a while, the nurse came back to the room.  
And she told William Barber that there was no one in the hospital by that name.

No one had checked in or out of the hospital by that name.  
No Ms. Watson.  
No woman in a wheelchair.

And the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II concluded that God had sent him an angel, and he was going to listen her...he would do the therapy that the doctors needed him to do, and he regained his strength, and he returned to serve his new church for the next 3 decades.<sup>1</sup>

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Do you remember miracle question #1?  
What does this story tell us about God?

Question #2 is like the first, but a bit more personal:  
**What does YOUR story tell you about God?**

Never mind William Barber's life.  
Where in your own life have you seen God's hand at work?  
Or where have you considered that something inexplicable might be God's hand at work...was that God? Could that have been God?  
But you cannot be sure...

If you sometimes struggle to answer that question, you're on faithful ground. Because part of what Presbyterians believe about miracles is that there's always room for DOUBT.

There's always room for another explanation.

Just look at Peter in our text for today.  
He saw Jesus, but he doubted that it was Jesus:  
Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you!

But Jesus does not punish him for his doubt.  
He invites him to walk through it.  
And do you recall what happens next?

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<sup>1</sup> As told by the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, on the podcast The Axe Files with David Axelrod, Episode 436.



“So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.”

For the briefest of moments, Peter...was just like Jesus.  
Filled with the miraculous presence and power of God.

So consider miracle question #2:

**What does your story tell you about God?**

Where in your life have you known a divine Presence that you're reluctant to explain away?

The retired professor Tex Sample writes about his son, Steve. Steve was, he recalls, “an absolutely adorable child.”

But when Steve reached his teenage years, he ran into trouble. His life through his late teens and twenties was one of drug and alcohol abuse. He was in and out of jail on a regular basis.

“During those awful fifteen years,” Sample recalls, “I began to hate the middle of the night...There were the phone calls in the early morning hours reporting an arrest or another accident...We despaired of his life [ever] changing.”

When Steve was twenty-eight years old, he met Nancy, and they were soon engaged. Nancy got Steve into a rehab program.

“Miraculously,” Sample says, “he dried out.”

Steve joined something called the Visions Motorcycle Club, as Steve loved motorcycles, was an excellent rider, and this was an AA motorcycle gang. They combined their love of bike riding with the struggle to stay dry and work for sobriety.

The Visions Motorcycle Club became Steve’s church.

“This motley crew of about thirty or forty men and women became his extended family...I can remember phone calls from members of the group just checking in to say how well Steve was doing...They would ask us to pray for them....”

Sample says: “He became the person we had hoped to see for all those fifteen years.”

Less than a year after he became sober, a truck-driver was momentarily blinded by the sun, and he collided with the bike Steve and Nancy were riding, and Steve protected Nancy during the crash, but Steve died from his injuries.

It was a devastating moment, made all the more piercing because Steve’s life was clearly on the right track.

Tex Sample was a professor at the St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. And he remembers the funeral:

“There was such an array of people there.

“Theologians, clergy...bikers,  
 friends of Steve...fighting alcoholism...  
 affluent and poor, black, brown, white...  
 PhDs and high school dropouts...”

“I remember the...support that came from this strange collection of people. A sense of...unbounded Connectedness crossed the chasms of the loss. I knew that outside that chapel **we lived among walls...**  
 but in the chapel—

for that moment—  
 it was [God]—  
 and the walls were broken,  
 the walls were down.”<sup>2</sup>

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Have you ever had a moment like that?  
 When the walls were down, and God’s Love was very real?

If you have, then ask yourself the third question:

### **What is Jesus asking you to do?**

That’s miracle question #3.  
 If you’ve seen God at work in your life—  
 if God has made God’s love known to you,  
 surprised you,  
 saved you when you could not save yourself...  
 what does that mean for how you live your life?

### **What is Jesus calling you to do?**

In our text for today, Jesus asks Peter to place his feet somewhere  
 he’s never walked before...and it’s scary!

Do you think Jesus might be asking you to do the same?

Maybe you’re having trouble forgiving someone.  
 Maybe you’re trying to make it through a new diagnosis.  
 Maybe you’re having sleepless nights about your child.  
 Maybe you’re wondering how long your grief or your anger will  
 keep hitting you, like waves crashing into your boat.

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<sup>2</sup> Tex Sample, “The Death of a Blue Jay,” in *Earthy Mysticism: Spirituality for Unspiritual People*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.

**It may very well feel like the wind is against you...**

What will happen when you step out of your boat,  
and into that wind, and respond to the call of Jesus?

I don't know what will happen.  
You don't know what will happen.

I do know this:

You can trust Jesus.  
And don't rule out...never rule out...  
the possibility of a MIRACLE...

Amen.