

For the last couple of weeks, a song from my youth has been playing in my head. You might know it too.

These are the days of miracle and wonder

This is the long distance call

The way the camera follows us in slo-mo

The way we look to us all, oh yeah

The way we look to a distant constellation

That's dying in a corner of the sky

These are the days of miracle and wonder

And don't cry baby, don't cry

Don't cry

(Boy in the Bubble by Paul Simon, 1985)

There are miracles and wonders in different age, sometimes they may be seen as more a result of technological advances, but they are also natural miracles and wonders. Although, perhaps we are reluctant to call them miracles?

This story in Matthew 14 is one of nine Nature Miracles described in the Gospels. You will recall Jesus turning water into wine, feeding the 5,000, stilling the storm and in this story, walking on water.

Bill Loader says,

This is a story with powerful symbolism. The waters and the great sea were deemed a threat; Semitic culture was not a great surf culture! The book of Revelation offers a vision of a paradise where the sea will be no more. The sea is traditionally the source of deep and threatening powers – dragons. It is linked to the great abyss. In some ways, its equivalent in Australia is the great inland, the feared desert.

As a storyteller, you will know that I look to the structure and shape of the story to find a way into the meaning and understanding of the story. Structurally, this is a straight forward story, its episodes following the passage of time, starting with

1. After noon dismissal

Jesus had taken the disciples into the country to spend some quiet time together. But the crowds followed him and he had spent most of the day teaching.

He was tired and he

...made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he dismissed the crowds

The tone of the story is weariness at the end of a long day of teaching, and of relief at being by himself.

2. Evening

The contrast is between Jesus being on the shore by himself and the disciples being out on the boat together.

The Sea of Galilee is known for its violent storms, which can erupt up suddenly and be life-threatening for any on its waters. These tempests are caused by where the lake is situated in the Jordan Rift with steep hills on all sides. The Sea of Galilee lies 680 feet below sea level. The cooler air masses from the surrounding mountains collide with the warm air in the lake's basin. When the contrasting air masses meet, a storm can arise quickly and without warning. Small boats caught out on the sea are in immediate danger.

For Matthew's audience, storms also brought to mind bigger-than-life mythical images and stories and songs of antiquity. The chaos dragon supposedly lived in the sea and a common belief in the ancient world was that storms in the sea were caused by the sudden rising of the chaos dragon. Storms were a kind of tidal wave caused by the great dragon, a symbol for the cosmic powers of evil. Hence the disciples fear at being caught in a storm.

3. Fourth watch/Jesus walking on the water

Fourth watch was between 3am and 6am (Roman watches were 6-9; 9-12; 12-3; 3-6). Fourth watch was the darkest part of the night.

Thus, it is not until the early morning hours, while it is still dark, that Jesus makes his appearance. The disciples, though, do not initially recognise Jesus in the midst of the chaos. They have been alone with the threatening waves for hours. They are probably tired from being up all night. At this point, when their energy reserves are spent, Jesus reveals himself to them.

No wonder they mistake Jesus for a phantom.

Given the common perception of the sea as the locus of evil and chaos, who could blame them for mistaking the figure of Jesus for a spectre of death.

4. I AM

The statement in the NRSV is translated

Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid.

This takes us back to the story of Moses and the burning bush when God says *I am who I am.*

Jesus is quoting the divine name, standing on the waters like God, with the powers of chaos under his feet. Jesus' tone is both comforting and quietly strong. He calms their fears just as God calmed Moses' fears at the burning bush. This connects to what Peter says, "Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Peter is simply trying to confirm that it is Jesus.

5. Peter's request

The next episode is told from Peter's point of view, Peter's experience of being able to do it, to walk on water. Then he becomes aware of the wind and waves. He becomes afraid and begins to sink. Now his voice is filled with panic and fear.

Lord, save me!

6. Peter walking on the water and in the boat

As a professional fisherman used to hauling nets, Peter would have been physically strong and used to the sea in all its moods, and for a moment, his faith is strong enough to make him believe that he too can walk on water.

And for a time, his faith does sustain him – until the reality of what he is doing dawns on him and panic sets in.

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Those in the boat declared *Truly you are the son of God.*

Bill Loader asks

What does it mean to affirm "Jesus is Lord"? What are the powers that destroy? Do we affirm the one who walks with power, whose power is compassion and healing.

The powers are more than inner demons. For Matthew and his people they also included social and political and religious powers.

They looked for justice and peace, the establishment of God's way in a world of oppression and inequality.

For the person facing the deep, what matters is that what we affirm of Jesus is a statement about God's power, God's love and forgiveness and healing and challenge.

There are times for all of us when our faith seems strong and we feel we can do anything. But, when the storms hit and the doubts set in, we can feel that we are sinking beneath the waves. Our faith is tested to its limits - and we can feel overwhelmed. It takes huge trust to continue - reaching out into the darkness and storm hoping that Jesus will be there to hold us safe.

Perhaps Peter striving to walk on water is a bit like encouraging a child learning to walk, or teaching a child to swim, or ride a bike

You know –

Come on, you can do it!

I'm right here, you can make it, just keep kicking!

Just keep going, I'll catch you!

Is it all a matter of faith that we can do it?

Storyteller, Tom Boomershine says,

This is a highly dramatic and expressive story. Jesus' responses to the fearful cries from Peter and the disciples are calm and strong. This story also provides a frame for all our experiences of fear and panic. We can remember the experience of the disciples in the boat and Peter on the sea in our moments of doubt and terror. This story also gives us permission to risk things and fail and to learn from that experience new levels of faith and confidence in God with us.

Can we be courageous and reach out, take risks and be prepared to fail.

And try again.

Do we have faith that God is with us?

Do we or do we do not hear the voice saying,

Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid

Or are we concentrating on the

O you of little faith why did you doubt

And in the end, is the miracle Jesus walking on water... or Peter?