

## **Human and Divine Nature** **August 13, 2023**

There is an old church joke that I'm fond of. A priest was interviewing to become the rector of a church. The Search Committee interviewed him, and he had great answers for all their questions. The Committee took him on a visit to a hospital to visit a parishioner who was sick. The prospective priest cheered her up in a heartbeat and said a prayer so beautiful that everyone was left with tears in their eyes. Then back at the church, the priest led the Search Committee in a short Communion service, and as he broke the bread, the clouds outside parted, and sunlight came streaming in through the windows.

Then, after the service, just to cap things off, the Search Committee and priest took a walk on the grounds. The priest wasn't watching where he was walking, and he stepped right into a pond on the property. He didn't sink in the water, though; he walked right on the surface.

The Search Committee was stunned as they looked at the priest, standing there on the water's surface. There was one member of the Committee though, who was not impressed. This sour curmudgeon was never impressed by anything. He simply grunted and said, "Look at this priest. He can't even swim!"

The story of Jesus walking on water is one of the most famous stories of the Bible after the Resurrection. Walking on water is synonymous with working miracles or being God-like. Today, we hear the story of Jesus coming to his disciples, walking on the sea, and their response is: "Truly you are the Son of God."

What strikes me when I read this story this week, though, was the lead-up to the main event. Jesus has just fed the 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. He sends off his disciples while he himself dismisses the crowd. But then Jesus doesn't follow after his disciples right away.

Instead, he goes up on a mountain by himself to pray. It's a moment that reminds us that Jesus is as human as we are. Prior to the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus learned that John the Baptist had been killed, and so he was distraught.

Now, finally, Jesus has a moment to be alone with God to pray and process and grieve.

It's only after Jesus takes this time to rest and be with his Creator that he comes walking across the sea to his disciples. In this story, we see Jesus first as a very ordinary man and then as the supernatural miracle-worker, the son of God.

Strangely enough, we get a similar picture of Peter. Peter is in the boat with the other disciples, fighting the waves and wind. He is presumably terrified (like the others) to see a figure walking on the water and thinks that this is a ghost. When Jesus speaks, Peter doubts and says, "If that's you, Jesus, then tell me to walk on the water to you."

It's an odd response to seeing Jesus walk on the water. It seems that Peter is doubting that this is Jesus, and so he issues a challenge. But when Jesus tells him to come, Peter (to his credit) obeys. He gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water to Jesus.

Of course, Peter's doubts get the better of him, and he begins to sink. Jesus quickly takes his hand and leads him back to the boat with a word of admonishment. "Why did you doubt?"

So like with Jesus, we have two images of Peter. Peter as human – doubting, questioning, even challenging Jesus. And Peter who is in some ways divine – who walks on water, like Jesus did (albeit with Jesus' help).

It seems to me that all of us are like Peter and in some ways, like Jesus. We have our ordinary moments, during which we live our regular lives. Like Peter, we have times of doubt, fear, disbelief.

And then we have moments when we are better than ourselves. We have times when God shines through us. Times when we reach deep and we find stores of strength or patience or faith that we didn't know we had.

You might have read some of the stories about the fires on Hawaii this past week. Some of the accounts are hard to read or watch. But in the midst of the suffering, I read a story about a firefighter who gathered up a couple families from the beach and led them through the burning town to safety. That kind of courage and faith to follow that man is incredible.

Barring a major disaster, we may find strength in ways that are less cinematic but no less divine.

- The strength to fight cancer or a debilitating illness
- The energy to care a friend who is struggling, even in the midst of our own hardships
- The dedication to keep working at a job that helps people in need, despite feeling discouraged

Jesus did not just come to work miracles. Jesus came also to empower his followers to work miracles too, to recognize that they have the power of God within them. We might not be able to walk on water, but as Paul reminds us in Philippians, we can do great things through God, who strengthens us.

Amen.