



## “Philately will get you nowhere”

Matthew 14:22-36

Last week I told my congregation the wonderful story of a young man who, at the age of eight, became interested in helping his dad organize his stamp collection. Over the years they compiled numerous stamp albums in which they displayed their stamps according to country, year, shape, and color. Both had clearly been bitten by the philately bug.

In his mid-twenties the young man fell in love, proposed to his girlfriend, became engaged, and was looking forward to married life. One evening as they were walking together hand in hand, he said to her, “You are more beautiful than any of my rare and valuable stamps, and I love you more than my entire collection.” She responded with great humor, “Philately will get you nowhere.”

For all the humor in this story, most of us realize that empty words are fairly meaningless. Yet we also realize that words can bring great joy, reassurance, and comfort into our lives, especially when we are facing unexpected challenges.

Being serious about growing in our faith often means that we face challenges we had not previously considered. I suspect most of us have found ourselves in exactly that situation over the last 12 months. This time last year few of us would have imagined the devastating impact of a global pandemic, the closing of international borders, the loss of large and small businesses, the disruption to children’s education, the devastating impact on the economy, and the heartbreaking grief involved in the substantial loss of life.

Now that we are moving into February of 2021, we are looking forward to receiving the vaccine and hopefully returning to some normality. Spring is just around the corner. We can begin to plan for graduations, family weddings, and even vacations later in the year. We have a long way to go, but surely we are heading in the right direction.

In a fascinating incident in Matthew’s Gospel, Peter and the other disciples find themselves facing a challenge they could not possibly have

anticipated. As a result, they radically reconsider the circumstances they find themselves in and intriguingly reconsider who Jesus truly is.

## During the fourth watch of the night... (v. 25)

In Matthew 14:22-33, after an incredibly busy day, Jesus seeks a place of solitude in order to pray. As the passage develops, the focus shifts to the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee. A storm of significant power erupts, and seasoned fishermen struggle to cross the sea. Yet it is not the strength of the wind or the possibility of sinking that frightens them. It is seeing Jesus walking toward them on the water amidst a storm that births their fear.

The response of the disciples is understandable. It was the early hours of the morning; they probably had not slept. In the darkness and confusion, the wind and the storm, the disciples confused Jesus with a ghostly figure. Perhaps it was easier to believe in a ghost than it was to believe that Jesus was walking on the water!

Several times in Scripture, a theophany occurs—a surprising, temporary appearance of God in a physical form, usually for the purpose of communicating a message or bringing assurance. Two examples are Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3) and Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel (Genesis 32). In these intense, extraordinary moments, those involved realize that they are in the physical presence of God. It is always a life-transforming experience.

Here in Matthew 14, on the Sea of Galilee in the most unexpected circumstances, the disciples were about to undergo a similar experience.

## “Don’t be afraid... (v. 27)

As Jesus approaches the boat, He calls out to the disciples and seeks to reassure them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Peter, amidst the fear and confusion, calls out in the darkness, “Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.”

Jesus responds to Peter with one word. “Come.” He is reminding Peter that he can safely place his life in Jesus’ hands. Yet when Peter climbs out of the boat and begins to walk towards Jesus, he notices the waves and begins to lose his balance.

I wonder what went through Peter’s mind in the fraction of a second it took him to notice the waves. Externally, nothing had changed. He knew about the force of the storm and the danger involved in stepping out of the boat. But internally, Peter’s focus had shifted away from Jesus. He was losing his balance. He was beginning to sink.

Jesus, of course, immediately reaches out and saves Peter. Peter discovers what others have discovered many times since: Human extremity often becomes a meeting place with God. The darkest moments, when all seems impossible, when you are sinking and there is no possibility of rescue, are often the moments of God’s most intense support and care.

When Jesus took Peter back into the boat, the wind died down. There in the boat the disciples realized what had happened, and they worshiped Him. Moments after a furious storm, realization dawned. The God who controlled the unpredictable frightening forces of nature had walked upon the water, stilled the storm, and was now present with them. God in His matchless grace and love, God in His sovereign power and purpose, was there with them. No wonder they were deeply moved and instinctively responded, “Truly you are the Son of God.” Their focus was no longer on the storm that had dominated their thinking and circumstances. The storm was now gone; their fears and concern had passed. Now they were focused on Him. “*Truly you are the Son of God.*”

As we examine this passage, we learn great lessons from the life of Peter. Yet we should remember that Matthew did not write his gospel so we can learn lessons from the life of Peter. He wrote it so we can learn to walk in the presence of God amidst extreme, unexpected circumstances and experience for ourselves the sustaining, enabling, comforting power of God.

May that be your experience in the remainder of 2021.

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