

The first word in our gospel text is "immediately."
 What's that referring to? –
 the event we read last week,
 when Jesus is preaching to 5000 hungry men,
 plus women and children.
 The disciples come up with five loaves of bread
 and two fish to feed the multitude.
 And there are 12 baskets of food leftover –
 a miracle.
 Immediately after that sacramental event,
 when the disciples would have most
 wanted to celebrate,
 Jesus orders them into a boat at dusk
 and sends them six miles across the Sea of Galilee.
 It becomes a night of primal fear.
 Some of the disciples are men of the sea.
 They know the risks.
 The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by steep hills.
 The air temperature can change abruptly,
 leading to sudden and violent wind gusts.
 Obedient to their Master,
 they start rowing without him.
 They are in the middle of nowhere
 when the wind whips up.
 The twelve men strain at the oars
 until they're exhausted.
 When daylight breaks,
 they're still in the middle of nowhere.
 No letup in the wind.
 One of them lets out a shout: What's that?
 Someone else says, It's a person, walking.
 Some of the men laugh.
 Another one says, No, it's a ghost.
 Now they all see it. Everyone stops breathing.
 A figure really is approaching them,
 walking on the water.
 Someone starts sobbing
 and pounding the boat with his fists.
 Quiet! The ghost is saying something!

"Courage! ...
 "Fear not! ...
 "I am."
 "I am who?" runs through their collective mind.
 Peter the impetuous thinks he knows.
 "Lord!" he exclaims.
 The others are convinced he's delusional.
 A night of chaos, turning into a dawn of terror.
 Is this real? Even the disciples aren't sure.
 If you don't believe Jesus really walked on water,
 nothing I say will convince you to believe.
 If you do believe Jesus walked on water,
 whatever I say might cause you to not believe.
 You're on your own
 as far as the historical truth of this story.
 Reasonable people differ
 on the historical truth of this story.
 The argument for its truth makes the point
 that Jesus has shown supernatural power
 over water before:
 Earlier, when Jesus and the disciples
 are in a boat together in a severe storm,
 Jesus sleeps.
 The boat is filling with water.
 Jesus rebukes the wind and the sea
 "and there is dead calm."
 In that event, too, Jesus chides the disciples.
 "You of little faith. Why were you afraid?"
 About the only different element
 in today's miracle is that Jesus
 boards the storm-tossed boat from afar.
 Working against historical truth are passages
 in Matthew and the other Gospels
 in which Jesus disavows
 wanting to upset the laws of nature.
 Water-walking is just the sort of stunt
 that Jesus rejects when the devil tempts him,
 like this –

*If you are God's son, command these stones
to become loaves of bread. Mt. 4:3*

*If you are God's son,
throw yourself down from the temple. Mt. 4:6*

If you will fall down and worship me.

I will give you the world Mt. 4:9

Defying the laws of God's creation
is devilish mischief.

If Jesus can walk on water,
why couldn't he just stroll to the middle of a lake
any time he wanted to get away from it all?

He doesn't. Either he rows a boat on the water,
or he climbs a mountain.

The laws of physics do not explain
how Peter can walk on water, if only briefly.
Does Jesus radiate some supernatural power?
You're on your own. You be the judge.

There are other ways to read the episode.
You could read it as an allegory of the church:
Jesus will seek out his church from on high.
Jesus will save his church from stormy waters.
(That would preach.)

But if this passage is an allegory,
it raises a couple of interesting questions.

Jesus puts the disciples in the boat.
No – he compels them into the boat,
so he can be on his own.

Is Jesus to be sometimes separate from the church?

On their own, the disciples set sail for disaster.

What kind of role models
are these church members?

The church is supposed to discern safe passage.

The disciples exhibit no discernment.

No experienced fisherman would set out
across the Galilee at night.

No one in this church-boat is faithful enough
to offer a prayer for safety.

Must the church wait passively and helplessly
for divine aid?

You're on your own if you make this an allegory
about Jesus and his church.

There's another way to have your argument
for the supernatural Jesus
and keep him human, too.

Spiritualize the episode.

The disciples are only feeling
battered and abandoned – spiritually.

It has not been a good day for them,
in front of their biggest multitude.

They would have sent the crowd home, hungry.

Jesus alone gets credit for feeding them.

Then Jesus orders the disciples, in effect,
to "get lost."

At sea, the disciples cope with a spiritual calamity,
a long, dark night of the soul.

At dawn they receive the strength and power
of Jesus and the spiritual tempest subsides.

You're on your own, if you spiritualize this episode.

And finally, there's the preacher's favorite trick:
substitute a different story,
something easier to interpret.

A little diversion that might shed some light
on the mystery of the text is

the second chronicle of Narnia, Prince Caspian.

The four Pevensie children return
several centuries later in Narnia time.

Once honored as royalty in Narnia,

they return as just four lost kids,

attempting to find their bearings
in an altered landscape.

They become hopelessly lost in a wild forest.

Lucy, the youngest child,

gets the briefest glimpse of the great lion, Aslan.

Hope swells in her child-like heart.

In vain, she tries to convince her sister and brothers
that Aslan is with them

and providing them direction.

They ignore her
and continue hiking in the wrong direction.
Aslan comes to Lucy again
and urges her to follow him,
"even if the others do not believe."
She acts with pluck.
The other three grudgingly follow her
until one by one
they are able to see Aslan for themselves.
Aslan speaks to Lucy's older sister:
"You have listened to fears, child.
Come, let me breathe on you. Forget them.
Are you brave again?"
Perhaps you see in Aslan an equivalent
to Jesus saying to the disciples,
"Take heart. I AM. Do not fear."
I think the scene on the water in Matthew
is about receiving the surprise gift of grace.
There is something sacramental about it.
"Lord, if it's you,
order me to come to you on the water."
(Note the if-then request is similar to Satan's.)
Jesus doesn't empower Peter so much as invite him:
"Okay. Come on."
Peter throws his feet over the side,
hangs from the gunnels, and drops.
His feet don't touch water.
Peter remains wonderfully eager and obedient.
He locks eyes with Jesus and starts walking
as if on snow-shoes: one step ... another step ...
then – whoosh!
A burst of wind makes him lose his balance.
With his next step, he's knee deep.
"Lord, save me!"
One-handed, Jesus catches Peter
and invents the Apostles' Chide,
Oligopiste [*huh-lee-GOP-ih-stay*],
"how many times do I have to tell you –
keep trusting me!"

The two haul themselves into the boat.
With not a word spoken, the cyclone stops.
The disciples prostrate themselves
worshiping Jesus.
"Truly, you are God's son."
We see the grace of the Holy Spirit
throughout this story.
I keep coming back to the last sentence:
Those in the boat fall and worship Jesus.
Maybe the whole passage is about worship.
There are other worshipful aspects:
Jesus blesses the crowds.
It's not so much about whether Jesus
has supernatural power as how the Holy Spirit
brings out a response in people.
Jesus dismisses the crowds
like a pastor greeting folks as they leave worship.
Jesus prays on the mountain, an act of worship.
There are many elements of worship in the episode.
Moreover, I think it is baptismal in nature.
Baptism is an outward sign of the Holy Spirit.
The impulse for baptism starts
with the workings of the Holy Spirit
in and through a person
who is a believing candidate for baptism.
Let's suppose a person new to Christian belief
has been attending worship regularly
and is thinking about getting baptized.
He or she comes to a minister seeking guidance.
The process involves setting aside
time and space for discerning prayer,
much as Jesus prays on a mountain, alone.
The candidate may need to separate somewhat
from the work-a-day world,
like the disciples are separate out there on a boat.
There may be some spiritual turbulence.
The prospect of committing one's life to God
can make the candidate feel at sea,
far from customary landmarks, buffeted by fear.

Baptism is a response to God's gracious invitation
to embark upon discipleship.
Should the candidate sense the nearness of "I Am,"
what better response is there than Peter's,
"Lord, if it is you, command me to come."
The Holy Spirit beckons the candidate,
just as Jesus says to Peter, "Come."
The first steps in the faith
may be full of confidence.
But comes a slip-up
and the candidate sinks into doubt.
By God's grace the candidate reaches the point
of utter reliance on the Divine Other:
"Lord, save me."
Like a candidate's faith,
Peter's is not wholly formed.
"O you of little faith. Why do you doubt?"
Newly baptized, Peter climbs aboard the boat.
Likewise a candidate finds safety
in the vessel of a congregation.
In the rite of baptism you can detect
this pattern of sinking, professing,
and rising again.
The congregation joins the candidate and minister
in affirming the words of the Apostles' Creed.
"He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again."
The minister prays over the pool of water.
"We thank you, O God, for the gift of baptism.
"In this water we are buried with Christ
in his death.
"From this water
we are raised to share in his resurrection,
reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit."
The Minister touches the water.
"May this water be a sign of deliverance and rebirth.
"May it wash away the sins
of those who are cleansed by it.

"May it raise them to new life and graft them
to the body of Christ."
Baptism celebrates God's gift of grace,
unworthy and sinful though we are to receive it.
Baptism is a sign that Christ accompanies us
through life's joys and life's stormy seas.
When a newly-baptized person
is received into full membership,
other members witnessing it
are urged to reaffirm their own baptisms.
... Eternally in the presence of Christ
and marked as one of Christ's own.
... Grafted onto the body of Christ,
just as Peter was grasped by Jesus
and hauled into the boat.
"I am baptized"
is the true and sufficient response
to the question, "Are you saved?"
In baptism, we are made members
of the Body of Christ.
We are initiated into the family of believers.
You may be on your own as to
how human or how divine you see Jesus
when he walks on water.
But I say more emphatically,
all of you are not on your own.
You are God's children.
Every baptized person affirms
with utter relief and buoyancy,
"I am not my own. I am Christ's."
Alleluia! Amen.