

“Think Hebrew”
Matthew 14:22-33
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
November 4, 2007

“...Who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the seas...” Job 9:8

“Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footsteps were unseen.” Psalm 77:19

Today I want to ask you to “Think Hebrew.” That will be somewhat different from what you are used to doing, as we were all trained to “Think Greek.” You have Alexander the Great to thank for that. Ever since you were in kindergarten, you see, you have been taught to think the way that good members of Western Civilization have always thought: very rationally. When studying a rose in high school science class, for instance, you were probably more concerned with its scientific aspects: the petals, pistil, and stamen. Right? You wanted to know how it was put together and its particular place in nature. If you had been good members of Eastern Civilization, however, you would have been more concerned with its poetic aspects. Rather than seeing a rose as something to be studied, you would have looked at that same rose as something to be enjoyed, as a thing of beauty in and of itself. And that is because Greek thought normally asks the “How” questions, while Hebrew thought usually concentrates on the “Why.” Greek thought is focused in the brain, while Hebrew thought is centered in the senses. Greek thought aims for the conceptual, while Hebrew thought looks toward the celebrative. Or look at it this way. Let’s think about the power that parents have on their children. The “Greek” mind may proclaim, “Both the male imprint of the father and the female imprint of the mother has a profound and determining influence on the direction and mindset of the off-spring.” On the other hand, the “Hebrew” mind will probably come up with something like: “If a father eats onions and the mother eats garlic, the child will not smell like perfume.” Now there is a whole lot more to those two comments than simply different ways of saying the same thing. While both comments may be right, they are miles apart in their understanding. Each may speak the truth, but they come at that truth from totally different perspectives. The Greek mind thinks in the analytical, the abstract, and the philosophical, while the Hebrew mind thinks in the holistic, the pictorial, and the

concrete. Neither way of thinking is necessarily wrong, but their different way of approaching the truth often leads to very different conclusions. And that certainly becomes evident when dealing with what is found in the Bible.

Take our story for today, for instance. The story of Jesus walking on the water is one of the most familiar gospel stories of them all. But what do you do with it? If you “Think Greek,” then the first thing you are probably going to do is decide whether or not Jesus actually walked on the water. Enquiring minds want to know, right? Well, if you think along those lines, then you would probably focus much of your attention upon the little word “epi.” In the original text, that is the word Matthew chose to describe Jesus’ nighttime stroll. Now according to my dictionary, you can legitimately translate “epi” as either “on,” as in “Jesus walked *on* the water,” or as “by,” as in “Jesus walked *by* the water.” And when you take a look at a map and see those places that the disciples were coming from and going to, when you take into consideration that both towns are on the northern shore and that the disciples probably hugged the coastline rather than actually crossed the Sea of Galilee to get there, then you’re probably going to settle on the word “by.” If you “Think Greek,” then this story is easily explained. After a night of prayer, Jesus made the three-mile trip from Bethsaida to Gennesaret simply by walking along the seashore. The disciples, whose boat was being tossed by the wind and waves, saw Jesus and *in their fear* simply assumed Jesus was walking on the water. Peter’s trip outside the boat then was probably nothing more than wading, and more than likely he simply fell into a hole. The laws of physics, especially Newton’s Third Law of Motion, would never allow anything like walking on water to occur. Miracles, you see, are easily explained if you “Think Greek.”

But what if you “Think Hebrew?” What if you looked at this story, or any other biblical story for that matter, in the same manner that it was written? Twenty-first century post-modern Americans didn’t write the Bible, you know. Matthew has always been assumed to be a first century Jewish Christian: one who grew up in the synagogue and was then converted to Christ. His whole background was Hebrew. More than likely, he was writing to a group of Christians who had a similar experience to his. They too were

Jewish Christians. They too had grown up in the synagogue. That's is why the gospel of Matthew has more Old Testament quotations and allusions than any of the other gospel accounts of Jesus. Matthew was born to "Think Hebrew." So let's use that understanding and look at the same story of Jesus walking on the water. How would it be different?

Well, for starters, we wouldn't worry about that little word "epi." It is just a vehicle to tell the story. Rather than focusing on the words that make up the sentence, those who "Think Hebrew" would focus on the message the sentence brings. And when that happens, several things would stand out.

- First of all, we would notice that this story happened immediately after Jesus fed the 5000. You may remember how Jesus took five loaves and two fish and created a meal that would have left even Martha Stewart standing in awe. When dinner was over, there were even twelve baskets of leftovers. Those who "Think Hebrew" would hear that and know that nothing that remarkable had happened since God rained down manna from heaven upon the children of Israel.
- After learning that, we would read that the disciples saw Jesus walking "early in the morning." The phrase Matthew uses is actually "the fourth watch," which would be anywhere from 3:00 to 6:00 in the morning. Now those who "Think Hebrew" would hear those words and know them to describe a very significant time. The book of Exodus tells us that God looked down on the Egyptian army through the pillars of fire and cloud during the fourth watch and threw them into a panic, enabling the children of Israel to be saved. They would also know that, according to one of their most beloved psalms, it was "early in the morning" that God was in their midst.
- I already mentioned the various scriptures that talk about God's path on, over, or through the waters. If we thought like Matthew we would know that there are others. When praising Lady Wisdom, for instance, the apocryphal book of Sirach says, "*Alone I compassed the vault of heaven*

and traversed the depths of the abyss. Over the waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway.” If you

“Think Hebrew,” you see, then you would know that biblical writers liked to use the image of the sea to represent the chaos of the world. And what better way to show God’s mastery over chaos than by God walking on it?

- Then we would probably turn our attention to this whole thing about the disciples crying out in fear when they thought they were seeing a ghost walking on the water, and to how Jesus responded by saying, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” When you “Think Hebrew,” you realize how important those words are. Jesus said, “It is I,” or more literally, “I am”—those are the very same words that God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. It’s the divine name. And “Do not be afraid?” It is no big secret that every time there is some kind of heavenly visitation in the scriptures, whether it was when God appeared to Abram or when Gabriel visited Mary, it always began with the words, “Do not be afraid.” If you had grown up like Matthew had grown up, then you would realize that Jesus’ response to the disciples is absolutely loaded with God imagery. And with it you would probably realize that this was more than just some two-bit carpenter from Nazareth.
- Finally, if we read the story like Matthew wrote it, we would see that Peter called Jesus “Lord.” How important is that! Someone known to “Think Hebrew” just like us called Jesus “Lord.” The very first Christian creed was “Jesus is Lord.” For Peter to refer to Jesus as “Lord” is nothing less than a declaration of faith.

As I hope you can see, when you “Think Hebrew,” this story becomes so much more than merely the report of a miracle. As a matter of fact, Matthew’s telling of the phenomena of Jesus walking on the water is a relatively minor detail in the grand scheme of this story. No, this is not just an account of something others think Jesus did at some specific point in his ministry. Rather, it is an account of an encounter with the God who was being made known to those twelve disciples through the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

And it is in that account and through that encounter, that we discover what it means to have faith. For it is in this story, you see, that we come across that phrase “little faith” once more. As I have told you over the last couple of weeks, in Matthew’s gospel “little faith” is Jesus’ favorite way to describe his disciples. Once again I would ask you to remember that, despite how it sounds, his doing so wasn’t an indication of or a judgment on their lack of faith. Jesus did not say, “You of no faith.” Nor did he say, “You of bad faith.” Rather, Jesus said, “You of little faith.” He recognized that they did have some, even if it was just the size of a mustard seed. But oh, what they could do with that little bit ‘o faith. They could move mountains. They could uproot trees. They could survive storms that threatened to undo them. They could, perhaps, even walk on the chaotic waters of life. You will recall that is the next part of the story. For when that fisherman saw Jesus, he asked, “Lord, if it’s really you, call me to come to you on the water.” So Jesus did just that. He said something like, “Come on out, the water’s fine.” And that’s where things got interesting.

Peter took a few steps, hanging ten here and there, but then actually became aware of what he was doing, felt the touch of the wind upon and the splash of the waves in his face, and began to sink. Now for those of you who have spent any amount of time in church, and maybe even if you haven’t, you have probably heard this preacher or that preacher say something about Peter taking his eyes off Jesus. That’s pretty much the standard way to preach this passage. As long as we keep our eyes on Jesus, then our own faith walk will be fine. And that’s certainly true. I have no disagreement with that kind of preaching. The intent of every spiritual discipline there has ever been has always been to “keep our eyes on the prize.” Please hear me when I say that there is absolutely nothing wrong with “looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” That is, after all, what we’re called to do. But is that what this passage is calling us to do—especially if we’re trying to “Think Hebrew?”

As a matter of fact, I think this whole passage could be seen as an invitation for us to think differently, to “Think Hebrew.” It seems to me that one could use this story as a challenge for us to try and see our world in a brand new way. Could you imagine the

thoughts that must have been going through Peter's mind? *"Well, here I am, walking on water. Even though my faith may be small, all those Sabbath School stories that I learned and which are lodged in the back of my mind tell me that I can do this. The God of my ancestors, the God of Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and Deborah, is Lord of all creation, after all. But wait a minute. Even though I am only a poor fisherman from the hick town of Bethsaida who only got a 3 on his SAT, I have heard a thing or two. One of the Roman officials was saying something the other day about a guy named Aristotle, who wanted people to use their brain. And though I have never even heard of Archimedes, the guy who discovered the principles of buoyancy and came up with the basic theory of water displacement, and even though it will be another 1892 years before George Samuelson invents water skis, I have been a fisherman long enough to know that THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE! Lord, save me!"*

Do you see? Our world has been built on the "How" questions. It is important for us to think rationally. We would not be where we are today without the cool head of logic leading the way. Our own John Wesley even said that reason was one of the four guidelines we should use to think critically about our faith. And yet to ask only those "How" questions is to miss out on a whole other world of possibility. We are also called to struggle with the "Why" questions. We are invited not only to use our reason, but our imagination as well. We need to look for the meaning, not just the cause of all the situations we encounter. Take our 2008 Budget for example. You knew that was coming, didn't you? If you focus only on the "How," if you see it only as what its going to take to keep us in business for another year, if you tend to "Think Greek," then you are going to end up scratching your head and being disheartened. It becomes nothing more than a set of numbers that looks unattainable. We might as well be trying to pull of a miracle. If, however, you focus on the "Why," if you see it as the way that God is at work in and through us, if you try to "Think Hebrew," then you will get a whole other perspective. And you don't have to have a ton of faith to do so. You don't need to be some spiritual giant to accomplish the impossible. The "little faith" you already have is more than enough. Even now Jesus is urging you to step out of the boat and see what faith in him can do. On this Sunday morning before our annual Stewardship Campaign comes to its

conclusion, I only have one question to ask. Are you willing to “Think Hebrew,” step out of the boat, and take that step of faith?

The world, which has always been our parish, awaits your decision.