



That leaves us with two questions: One, why were some things left out, and two, why were other things put into the gospels?



Why this story? Why this saying? Assuming that the gospel writers had plenty of material to choose from in telling the saga of Jesus, why did they select this miracle or that healing, or why did they tell it in this particular way? Of course, the evangelists were writing in, with, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but it's also reasonable to conclude that what they wrote was also shaped by what was going on in the lives of the people for whom they composed their gospels. Uncovering that background is no easy task, and for some gospel stories, the best answers we can come up with are pretty sketchy. But that's not the case for today's gospel.

Matthew, Mark, and John, all include some version of Jesus walking on the water.

At the heart of each telling is a spectacular display of Jesus' power. Not only does Jesus make the paralyzed walk, the blind see, and the mute speak, but Jesus even has mastery over the very laws of nature. He defies the physics of buoyancy, controlling the very wind and waves, a miracle that, to those with eyes to see and ears to hear, discloses him as the very Son of God. But Matthew, and only Matthew, adds to this story the drama of Peter getting out of the boat and attempting to walk out on the water to meet Jesus.



Why? What was Matthew getting at that he added this special material to an already stunning miracle?

For one thing, we know that the people to whom Matthew addressed his

gospel were in a very tough situation. Many introductions to Matthew describe his gospel as being addressed to Jewish Christians. They conclude that from the multiple Old Testament references that run from the beginning to the end of the First Gospel. Over and over again Matthew uses the formula, "as it is written," to provide prophetic context for Jesus' words and deeds. The Jewish background to Matthew is unmistakable, but to say that Matthew was writing to Jewish Christians is actually a little misleading. Matthew was writing to Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah and the bringer of God's rule to earth. Their separation from what we now call Judaism was not yet complete, though the writing was pretty much already on the wall.





Matthew understood that if he and his people continued in their allegiance to Jesus, contrary to the teaching of the Pharisees, they would effectively be stepping out of the boat, or even thrown out the boat. Remember, too, that in the Bible boats of any kind conjure up the image of that boat of all boats, Noah's ark.

For the people of Matthew's gospel, following Jesus would feel like they were leaving the ark of salvation.

Now we might think: so they stop being Jews and start being Christians, big deal. Well, yeah, it was a big deal. Imagine your son or daughter telling you that they were renouncing their American citizenship and going to live in North Korea. It would be pretty hard not to take that personally. After the initial shock wore off, you'd probably start to get angry.

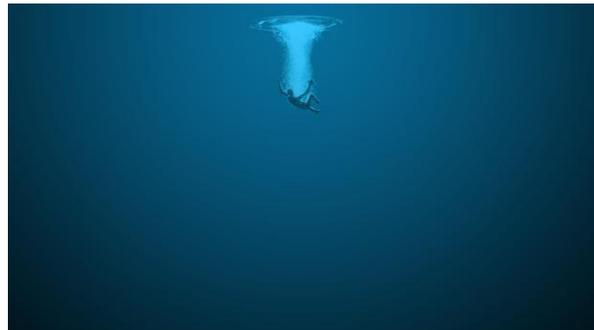


You might even renounce them, throw them out your house, and vow never to have anything to do with them ever again. That was exactly the situation Matthew's people were facing. As long as these believers persisted in professing Jesus Lord, they were risking total rejection by their nearest and dearest. People would be calling them traitors to the faith of their fathers, and given that family and friends

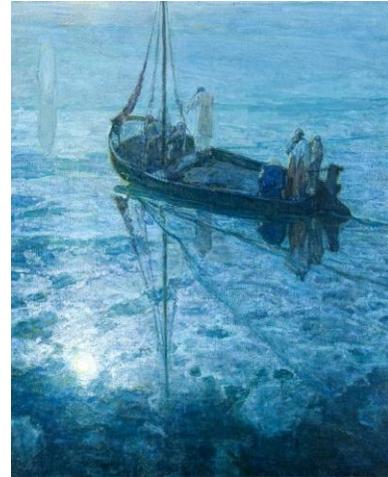
constituted the only social safety net for people in those days, they would be on their own, all by their lonesome, you might even say adrift, unmoored, thrown overboard.

How would they survive? How could they manage the storms of life with nobody there to help? In recalling this miracle and telling it in this way, Matthew is assuring his community that they will not be on their own. They will not be abandoned. Jesus will be there.

The man who walks on water and controls even the wind and waves is able to sustain you, even though your family and friends reject you, your community persecutes you, and you are completely isolated from all known means of support. His mighty presence will keep you afloat, and that promise calls for our trust. He won't let you drown, he'll reach out to save you, and by faith in him not only can you get out of the boat but you can even walk on the water.



Thank God, we don't face the same risks as those first-generation followers of Christ, but answering Jesus' call can still be kind of risky. Most of us are sailing the waters of life in boats that are pretty comfortable, usually because they're filled with people that make us feel comfortable. I was recently listening to an interview with an author who argued the point that in some ways America might be more segregated than even back in the bad old days of racial segregation.



We often get our news from sources that reinforce our views and opinions. We live in congressional districts that tend to be much more politically lopsided than in the past. We make our homes in subdivisions and send our kids to schools that often directly reflect our economic and social standing. More and more, too, we are seeing communities that are age or lifestyle determined, for seniors, or singles, or childless. And of course, we frequently attend churches with people who think like us, vote like us, and typically look like us.



Getting out of that kind of boat can be kind of scary, especially as it may put us in unfamiliar waters and in contact with people who don't share our background, don't hold our values, and maybe don't even speak our language.

Having just recently returned from our pilgrimage to Peru, I can, as many of you can also, testify to the stresses and strains of traveling in a land where you don't know the language or the customs and you are very obviously the outsider.

It's hard, and towards the end of that kind of trip you may, as I did, start longing for your bed, your shower, your land, your country, your people and your place where you know way around and you're in charge, more or less. You just naturally want to get back in your berth in your boat and pull up the covers, turn off the lights, and forget all about Jesus out there on the water calling you to join him.

For Matthew's original audience, the boat they had to get out of was sort of like the bosom of Abraham, the people and the place where they felt safe and secure. For us, the boat is, I think, the kind of social bubbles we tend to live in these days, and especially the social bubbles that our churches are prone to become.

Jesus calls us to meet him in a world teeming with people who don't know him, don't know us, and often don't want to know either him or us. The vast majority of the people of the world don't look like us, talk like us, and certainly don't live like us, but for them, as for us, Jesus suffered and died and rose again.



And he calls us, as he calls them, to step out and meet him, the Lord of the Universe, in the turmoil of this stormy world.

That doesn't mean that we all have to become missionaries and pick up sticks to live on the other side of the world. But it does mean we are called to mission, and that mission might be right next door, or across town, or in your own family.



Mission is answering Jesus' call to get outside ourselves, our problems and our issues, to make a space for sharing the love of God. Martin Luther once described sin as being curved in on oneself, and so redemption in Jesus means to be turned out to face our neighbor, to meet the stranger, to hear the cries of the poor and attend to the needs of the orphan and the widow. And for that, of course, we have to get out of our boats, which brings us back to faith.

Yes, I know, it's scary. It's so much easier to stick with the things we know and the people that make us feel comfortable.

But it is Jesus who's calling, and after all, he rules even the wind and the waves.

