

# Trampling on Wild Waves

## A SERMON ON MATTHEW 14:22-33 AND PSALM 107

*Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our rock, and our redeemer.*

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, an Irish abbot named Columba - St. Columba  
founded the original community of monks on the Scottish Isle of Iona.  
One day, August 22, 565, he was on an errand more inland,  
when he came across some locals  
who were burying a friend whom they claimed  
had been snatched and mauled by a “water beast” while swimming.

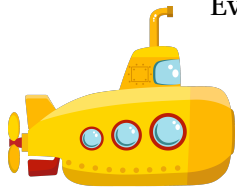
Proving that even saints can make some questionable choices,  
when St. Columba heard about this, he ordered a monk who was traveling with him,  
Br. Lugne Mocumin, to swim across.

And sure enough, an enormous water beast  
came to the surface and roaring,  
rushed on the swimming monk with gaping jaws.

This event occurred at Loch Ness,  
and this is the first written record  
of an encounter with “Nessie.”



Whether or not you believe there is something living in the depths of Loch Ness,  
there is something about deep water that  
evokes fears of what may be lurking in primordial chaos.



Even with all our modern technologies,  
only about 5% of the world’s oceans have been explored.  
And a lot of the creatures they’ve found in the deep sea  
truly are pure nightmare fuel,  
at least by my terrestrial standards.

Keep this in mind as we think about the Gospel lesson this morning.

That water can be scary.

Even if there is no Loch Ness Monster about,

the wind and the waves themselves are wild...and not a firm surface.

2023  
~~565~~  
1458  
years ago

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It should probably go without saying, but, excepting when it is frozen, water is not a stable surface. **You can't walk on it.**

On a surface level, this passage can be understood as Jesus doing the impossible to prove that he is the Son of God. But let's go deeper.



This isn't just **any** super power defying the laws of physics - walking on water is a **very particular power**, a **prerogative** that seems to belong **only** to the God of Israel.



The only Greek myths that come close refer to figures who are so fast that they can run or fly across the water without breaking the surface. The **emphasis** is not on the water, but on the **speediness** of Hermes, for example.

In the Gospel account, indeed in all gospel accounts - it is in Matthew, Mark, and John - it is explicitly **walking** that Jesus does - the verb is περιπατῶν. But it is not the slower pace alone that is noteworthy.

Water-walking is referred to in the Old Testament as something that God does. For a couple of examples:

In **Job 9:8** God is described as

“He who walks on the sea as on firm ground”

In **Isaiah 43:16**, God is

“the Lord who makes a way in the sea and a path in the mighty water”



And why is it so proper for water-walking to be so identified as a God-thing?

It goes back to what water symbolizes - that primordial chaos.

And God as creator brings order out of that chaos.

He is master of it.

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Master even those monsters of the deep, like Nessie, or within scripture, like Leviathan.

Psalm 104, says that God created Leviathan to sport in the waters.

His relationship to even monsters is not described as being equal and opposite forces, or even opposing forces at all.

God is the Master of the wind, the waves, the water, and all that dwell therein.

Of course the other explanation is that Jesus is a Ghost.

There was a belief, not necessarily in keeping with Jewish teaching, that if a man died at sea that his ghost would remain out there, stranded.

The disciples seem to initially go with this conclusion.

But Jesus tells them: “It is I”

- okay, time to look at what is hidden in the Greek.

εγώ εἰμι “I Am” - the divine Name that was

told to Moses at the burning bush incident in Exodus

- written the same way as it appears in the

Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures that Jesus’ disciples would have known.



The divine Name that often results in people falling on their face, prostrating in worship

And indeed, this passage ends with the disciples in the boat falling at His feet saying “truly You are the Son of God.”



Now, given that water-walking is definitely God-activity,

let’s consider Peter, who also did the water-walking.

While I don’t recommend attempting to walk across any local lakes unless they are sufficiently frozen - this Gospel points to something quite empowering, that may seem to border on the blasphemous.

**Peter is not God** - I don’t know of anyone who would claim otherwise.

But Peter makes that outlandish request of Jesus, and is granted it.

But pay attention to what it is that Peter asks.

He does not say “Lord, give my this power” - he says “Lord, **command me**”

he does not demand “make me walk on water too”

he asks “**command me to come to You.**”



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These details are significant. “Command me to come to You”

Don’t lose sight of how it is Christ

who’s command empowers Peter to step out onto the waves,  
remember Peter starts to sink when his focus shifts away from the Lord,  
and that it is Christ who saves him.

Going back to St. Columba, I left off the story just when it was getting good.

If you remember, the Loch Ness Monster had just appeared

and was about to devour poor Br. Lugne.



But Saint Columba, according to the legend,

“raised his holy hand and made the sign of the cross in the air,  
and invoking the name of God,  
he commanded the fierce beast:”

(channeling Gandalf) You shall not Pass!

okay, it’s actually recorded as “You will go no further!”

“At the sound of the saint’s voice,

the beast fled in terror more quickly than if it had been pulled back with ropes”

Br. Lugne was unharmed (if perhaps traumatized),

and the locals were convinced of the power of Christ’s name

and converted on the spot,

being baptized in the very waters they once feared.



Again we see that the power is ultimately Christ’s,

but that amazing things can happen when, in following His commands,

he grants us to participate in His own works.



Another water-themed story about another Irish monk-saint comes to mind  
- that of Saint Brendan the Navigator (484-575).

Saint Brendan is best known for his fantastical voyage from Ireland to maybe  
North America.

He called it the Land of Promise of the Saints

Centuries before even Lief Erickson (970-1022) made the trip.

It took Brendan and his crew of monks seven years until He was told

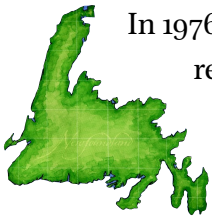
“This is the land you have sought after for so long a time;

but you could not hitherto find it,

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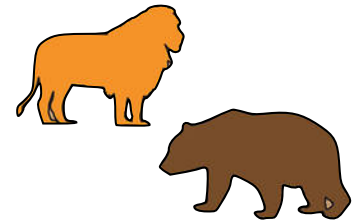
because Christ our Lord wished,  
first to display to you His divers mysteries in this immense ocean.

Among these diverse mysteries that marked Brendan's voyage,  
was his relationship with the whales.  
One whale in particular it seems would follow Brendan's boat,  
and would let him and the monks with him walk around on top of his great back.  
It is said that each year of their voyage,  
they celebrated Easter Sunday on the back of that whale.



In 1976, five men led by British historical explorer Tim Severin  
replicated the voyage using fifth century Irish technology,  
and indeed got from Ireland to Newfoundland.  
And indeed, noted whales accompanying them,  
swimming right under their hide covered coracle.

There are many tales of Christian saints  
befriending normally fierce animals - Lions, Bears.  
I don't know of any tigers, but Lions and Bears - oh my!



But I find it especially fascinating when the creatures in question  
are symbolic embodiments of that primordial chaos like enormous sea creatures,  
because even those extreme examples are shown to be ultimately under God's control.

And in these examples, God doesn't display this power alone,  
but chooses to work together for good with people, called according to his purpose.

When Jesus walks on the waters,  
The point is not only to tell us that Jesus is powerful,  
but that he can work that power through us, according to His purposes  
even when we can't and have to call on him, "Lord, save us."

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*