Genesis 18:1-5
The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on —since you have come to your servant.”
So they said, “Do as you have said.”

Matthew 14:22-33
22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”
28 Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”
31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”
32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

WE BEGIN TODAY BY ACKNOWLEDGING A PROBLEM with terminology. Calvary Presbyterian Church is following a tradition of celebrating worship in such a way as to honor our common bonds as religious persons who come from differing traditions and worldviews. The terminology often used for this kind of religious gathering is “interfaith”, meaning the three Abrahamic faiths: Christian, Jewish and Muslim. But there are other significant, ancient religious traditions that could also be included, which do not speak of “faith” in the sense that many of us do. Buddhism, for example, is not about God but about the teachings of a man who never claimed to be God, the Buddha. So, one never hears the phrase “Buddhist faith.” And then, there is Hinduism, which has no founder, no single sacred text, no set pattern of worship, and no central statement of belief. Hinduism has many gods and the gods have thousands of names, which change depending on local custom. Hinduism offers different paths to union with the divine. Some people choose a scholarly path and others a path of service. Some choose a path of meditation and others a path of devotion. Some devote themselves to Vishnu and some to the Divine Mother. Some shun the worship of deities altogether, striving to realize God in themselves with no decoys. Others mix and match.1

1 I am deeply indebted to Barbara Brown Taylor and her descriptions of various religious traditions, which I have at times used verbatim without attribution in this sermon. Where BBT’s own thoughts and ideas are quoted, I have so indicated in the text. Where the material seems largely descriptive, I have chosen not to clutter the sermon with those citations. I highly recommend her engaging, challenging and highly readable book Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others (HarperLuxe: New York, 2019). BBT does not acknowledge the problematic nature of the word “faith” in her exploration of other religious traditions.
MOST PEOPLE THINK OF “FAITH” as a body of knowledge or beliefs, as in “the Christian faith.” Used in this way, faith refers to a set of dogmas or doctrines—ideas about the nature of God, what Jesus’ life and death and resurrection mean, what the Holy Spirit is, what the Church is, and so forth. For Jews, there are the Hebrew scriptures, the God of Israel, the Torah, the law, the Shema, the concepts of righteousness and justice, of mitzvah and kosher, the Talmud and Midrash, Yom Kippur, Passover, and other Holy Days of observance. A famous twelfth-century rabbi named Maimonides came up with thirteen principles of Jewish faith, but there is nothing binding about them. For Muslims, there are the five Pillars, Allah, the Qur'an, Sharia law, Ramadan and the Eids, the Prophet Muhammad. Used in this way, faith is something to which we give assent, or not. In this sense, faith is something outside of us. It existed before we were born and will continue after we die. And the question is, what relationship—if any—will we have with this set of doctrines and practices—and, truth is, most of us get hung up on doctrines. For instance, one might say, I’m not sure what I believe about the resurrection or original sin, about Jesus’ birth or universal salvation.

THIS APPROACH makes faith an intellectual exercise. And we call this intellectual exercise “theology.” And there is a place for theology, because beyond the question of whether or not you believe in God, there is also the question of what kind of God you believe in? A distant observer? A stern, demanding, taskmaster? An involved, caring presence? A font of wisdom? A passionate, transforming fire? The fact is, how we answer such questions determines to no small extent how we live our lives, day-to-day, week-to-week, year-to-year.

THEOLOGIZING IS ABOUT THINKING AND TALKING. And in seminary, one of the things students learn to do is to “talk the talk” of theological reflection. That’s a good thing. In seminary we go beyond late-night philosophical conversations in college dorm rooms and dig deep into the tradition of systematic theology and intellectual history to think critically about essential matters of life and death and life beyond death. But talking the talk isn’t enough. It’s not the whole story. We not only have to talk the talk; we have to walk the walk. And that’s what our scripture is about today, literally, but also figuratively. It asks us about walking the walk of faith, which is what it means to walk on water. The story in Matthew’s Gospel compels us to consider faith in a different way: not as received tradition or intellectual exercise, but as power, the power to act, to take risks, accomplish unheard of, amazing things—things we can barely imagine, things we are timid about asking for, because they seem so impossible, so unlikely. In this sense, faith is the power at work in us, the power we allow to work in us. Christian faith in this sense is how we witness to the real presence of Christ in the 21st century. Faith is walking the walk, not just talking the talk. In our Gospel story for today we see Jesus walk on the water, and then we see Peter try to walk on the water and nearly drown.

HAVE YOU EVER TRIED IT—walking on water? Walking on water is a logical impossibility. Many attempts have been made to explain how it could have happened. All are pretty laughable. I think the best explanation is that Jesus knew where the stones were. But as one Biblical scholar put it: “To me, the challenge of faith has little if anything to do with my taking these things literally, and everything to do with my taking them seriously.” So, let’s put aside our scientific inquiries and technical explanations, and take this story seriously. This entire section of Matthew focuses on the spiritual formation of the disciples, Jesus’ inner circle. It’s in this section that Peter emerges as a leader, a first among equals. And he emerges not because Jesus singles him out, but because Peter himself—impetuous Peter, brash, reckless Peter—has begun to grasp the holiness and potential of this Jesus of Nazareth, and is moved—compelled, if you will—to try something new.

THE STORY BEGINS AT NIGHT—in darkness. It’s been a big day—earlier, thousands of people were fed miraculously. Exhausted, Jesus and the disciples dismiss the crowds and escape to the other side of the lake. Then, Jesus dismisses the disciples and climbs the mountain to pray, leaving them in the boat. And while he’s gone, a strong wind begins to blow and takes the disciples’ boat way out on the lake. And, as the NRSV says, “the wind was against them.” So, now the disciples are distraught. They are being battered by the wind and the waves; their sense of danger is

heightened by the turmoil and tumult that has overtaken them and wakened them from sleep. They are literally and emotionally unmoored. This is a metaphor, right? It’s a metaphor for what happens to us in life—personally, in our relationships, in our institutions and society, in the church—and maybe especially in the church: tossed about, out of control, adrift in a storm, at the mercy of external forces, frightened and emotionally vulnerable, worried and anxious about what’s going to happen to us and what the future holds.

SO, LET’S TALK ABOUT THE POWER OF FEAR. Life is out of control fear. The rug has been pulled out from under us fear. It’s called fear of the future. Fear of what lies ahead. We may be fearful because of what seems to us a certainty. Or we may be fearful because of the unknown character of what lies ahead. What we fear is loss of things precious—loss of love, of friends, of wealth, of health, of status, of life itself. The loss of an anchor to steady us, of a north star to guide us, of companions to care for us. This is a big reason for fear—and it’s just such fears that make us human. There’s not a human being who has not felt fear about the future, whether it’s a question of where our next meal is going to come from, or how we’re going to pay our bills, or overcome our addiction, or battle a deadly disease. This fear is a powerful feeling and it exerts real power over our daily lives. But there is a second kind of fear that I also want us to consider—the fear of the stranger, the other, the alien. Those fears also can rule our lives, distort our decisions and warp our thinking. It’s the fear the disciples felt when they saw that phantasma, ghost—or at least what they think is a ghost. The appearance of the ghostly creature only makes things worse, heightening their sense of panic, distress, and fear engendered by the storm at sea.

THIS FEAR OF THE STRANGER is the embodiment of our fear of the future and our impending sense of loss. Strangers can be inherently threatening, although they don’t have to be. Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk, social activist, and scholar of comparative religion, once said that “God speaks to us in three places: in scripture, in our deepest selves, and in the voice of the stranger.” And, as Barbara Brown Taylor reminded me in her wonderful, new book Holy Envy, “it’s important to remember how many religious strangers played lead roles in Jesus’s life: the Canaanite woman who expanded his sense of agency, the Samaritan leper who showed him what true gratitude looked like, the Roman centurion in whom he saw more faith than he had ever seen in one of his own tribe.” “In Judaism they are called ‘righteous gentiles.’ … In story after story, they enter stage left, deliver their blessing on the Christian gospel, and exit stage right, leaving their mark on a tradition that is not their own.” Actually, as Taylor continues, “this tradition of strangers bearing divine gifts begins early in the Bible with the story of Melchizedek, a Canaanite king and priest who comes out of nowhere bearing bread and wine for Abraham … after a great battle.” That story is in Genesis 14, four chapters before our reading today. But in our passage this morning, Genesis 18, we also heard that God appeared to Abraham in the form of three strangers, yet another reminder of how God works through religious strangers. Again, as Taylor reminds us, “For reasons that will never be entirely clear, God sometimes sends people from outside a faith community to bless those inside of it. It does not seem to matter if the main characters understand God in the same way or call God by the same name. The divine blessing is effective, and the story goes on.”

SO, LET’S RETURN to story in Matthew’s Gospel. Though frightened, the disciples quickly discover that the ghost, the stranger, is Jesus, who is now walking on the water toward this small band of frightened, overwhelmed, and distraught disciples, caught in the fiercest of storms in the darkness of night. And with his words, and his presence, he comforts them. It is a powerful image: of help, of rescue, and even of salvation. Some scholars think this could be a post-resurrection story placed in the middle of the gospel. But for Matthew, the story doesn’t end there as it does in the other gospels. Matthew shines the spotlight on Peter, who is suddenly bold. Now Peter gets in the act. He wants to be with Jesus; to do what Jesus is doing. And he asks Jesus to command him to leave the boat and walk out to meet him, and Jesus obliges. So, Peter steps out. Gets out of the boat. Steps onto the water. Peter tries to walk the walk. But he begins to sink, and Jesus has to pull him up out of the water.

4 BBT, Holy Envy, 145.
5 Ibid., 149.
6 Ibid., 150.
7 Ibid., 151.
IS THE LESSON here that because Peter began to sink, that we should not risk what Peter risked? Did Jesus tell Peter to stay in the boat? Of course not! Jesus said, “Come on, Peter, you can do it. Walk the walk, Peter! Get out of the boat and come join me. You can do it, just like I did. Walk on the water, Peter. Walk-on-the-water! That’s the dilemma we face as a country these days and as people of faith. We’re sinking. But like most of the disciples, we’d rather stay in the boat and continue to do what we know how to do than to try something we’ve never done before. Staying in the boat is sane, right? Walking on the water is foolish, dangerous and idiotic. We know better. It’s safer in the boat. We’d rather stay in the boat and talk about how frightened we are that Jesus has asked us to walk on water. Let’s theologize about it! Let’s complain about it. We’d rather stay in the boat and wait for Jesus to perform another miracle on our behalf than to respond to his summons and step out of the boat and walk on water. But that’s not the lesson of this story. Faith isn’t faith unless it motivates us to risk ourselves, to do something we didn’t think possible. That’s faith as power, faith as the means to do something for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of reconciling the world, for the sake of justice, for the sake of engaging the world with all its violence, consumerism, and indifference with the message of peace, community and compassion.

FAITH CALLS US to act in ways that bridge the gaps and close the distances between human beings. That is why Jesus walked on the water -- not to prove how great he was or how unique, not to make us marvel, as one would marvel at the execution of a magic trick; but to seek reconciliation, to overcome alienation, to offer forgiveness, to calm someone’s fears, to bring people together, to make whole, to give life, to make new, to show the way. At the core, practicing our faith is an exercise in “living as if...” Living as if something were true. Living as if we have courage (even though we don’t). We pretend to have faith, and then faith comes. We live as if we care about something, and we find that we do care. We live as if we are a covenant community, open to God’s Spirit, and more and more we become such a community. Faith means living as if something were possible (even though we know it isn’t) but then, lo and behold, it becomes possible. “Living as if” is unpredictable and not a little scary at times. Like Peter, those who risk something for the sake of bridging the gap will falter and experience that “sinking feeling,” feeling at times as though the wind and rain and darkness are too much to contend with.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT when we are confronted by strangers, whether they are people who look different from us, or practice their religion in a way that is foreign to us, or who speak in ways we are not used to hearing. As Taylor reminds us, “however you define the problematic present-day stranger—the religious stranger, the cultural stranger, the transgendered stranger, the homeless stranger—scripture’s wildly impractical solution is to love the stranger as the self. You are to offer the stranger food and clothing, to guarantee the stranger justice, to treat the stranger like on of your own citizens, to welcome the stranger as Christ in disguise. This is God’s express will in both testaments of the Bible.”

“The remarkable thing about the stranger-loving commands in the Bible is that they appear in the sacred scriptures of Jews and Christians, which are honored by Muslims as well.”

Success is not guaranteed, nor is there any assurance that we will not endure difficulties, setbacks, and unexpected consequences. But the measure of our faith is not only the willingness to risk, but the willingness to trust in God’s steadfast, loving presence; and in God’s power to bring us through, to make the impossible possible, to reach out and grab us and help us through life’s storms, to welcome the stranger is if our lives depended on it. The night may be dark, and we may be afraid of the tumult and tempest that surround and engulf us. But Jesus is calling us to step out of the boat. Let’s be bold and walk on water.

Let it be so for you and for me.

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8 Ibid., 152f.