# God Cannot Be Contained

*A Homily on Jesus Walking on the Water*

When I was in my mid-20s, I served as the director of faith formation at the Nativity Episcopal Church in Burnsville. Due to several staff transitions in my first year there, I inherited the Tuesday morning Bible study. Because of this meeting time, most of the members were double or triple my age, and I started wondering: How could I lead people with this much wisdom?

Through our seven years together, we learned and we grew together, and I was grateful to learn everyone's unique perspective on the Bible and what they brought to our sacred stories when we dug into them.

One of the members was a retired priest who approached the miracles of the Bible with a need for historical and scientific connection. Noah and the flood? It had a reason. Moses splitting the Red Sea? He had a story to go along with that, too. Jesus walking on water as well. I respected his approach, and I valued hearing the passion with which he would share whenever we got to a biblical miracle. I also remember thinking, 'That sort of makes sense in a way.'

I have no memory of those explanations this many years later. What I do remember is my heart sinking at how all of the holy mystery was sucked out of each of the stories. For me, although I understood the approach, it shrunk God to fit into our limited understanding and mortal perspective.

That's a long way of saying: I am in the boat with the disciples today.

I don't know how Jesus walked on water, and believing it is even a little scary, because what does that mean about God? But unlike the disciples, I've had years to hear this story, and so I'm comfortable saying I don't care that I don't know how he walked on water. I love the mystery and the miraculousness of it. I love that we follow a God who cannot be contained by our limits of understanding or perspective.

Like last week's story of feeding 5,000 with a few loaves and fish, I believe we are called to ask: What truth is revealed about God in this sacred story?

From a biblical perspective, Jesus' walking on water and his words today connect him to God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Those who know Job well hear God's questions to Job about the cosmos, linking Jesus to God the Creator in those sacred conversations.

Jesus' statement, 'Take heart,' is more accurately translated as, 'Take heart. I am.' What God says to Moses in the burning bush—'I am'—Jesus is essentially using those exact words, weaving his identity into God as his disciples understood it.

Although this is important, I don't believe the truth that is revealed is limited to it. Burnsville is also where I heard for the first time the expression, 'Don't put God in a box.' And unlike the explaining away of miracles, I felt my spirit lift at this expression.

In many of the sacred stories, and sometimes in our lives, Jesus moves and acts in ways we cannot fully understand. When we explain away the miracles and put God in a box, our understanding of God becomes brittle. We start judging what God can and can't do. We start judging who is in and out of God's love. We only look for God where we expect to see God, and we risk putting ourselves in front of God.

The older I become, the more I realize how much I do not understand in life and how limited my ability is to act in the vastness of our world. I find comfort in a God who is not limited by that understanding.

When we sit with the holy mysteries of God's story, we are called to embrace what God is revealing, while not saying, ‘What I know is all there is in the story,’ and while not saying, ‘This is all there is to know about God.’

I imagine that most people here today hear other things in today's Gospel than I know. But what I hear is that Jesus is with us in the storm. Jesus is the one who reaches out to save us with a hand. Jesus reminds us today to look for God in places where we don't expect to see God. Jesus reminds us to look for God moving in ways we don't expect to see God move. Jesus reminds us to be open to that movement with wonder rather than frozen by fear.

However, I am finding comfort in the disciples' initial reaction. The disciples are afraid, and they don't have it all figured out. Through many stories, including this one, they ask questions, and their perspective shifts, and then they get it wrong again. And so Jesus chose them to follow him to Jerusalem. They had a little faith, which is often enough to start, and a commitment to keep following Jesus.

As I have been wondering about unexpected ways God has been revealed, I also thought of the members of my Tuesday Bible study. In our years together, members shared how God moved in their lives, how God healed, how God spoke to them. But we also had the gift of seeing how God was currently moving in each other's lives.

In particular, I remember one elder who emphatically stated that he did not understand the gift of same-sex marriage. Shortly after that statement, he also said yes to mentoring a teen at Nativity for confirmation, a two-year commitment. That teen was struggling in many parts of his life and needed supportive adults with him.

The ease with which their relationship became mutually supportive was surprising to everyone who watched. It went beyond the boundaries and requirements of confirmation preparation: meals at each other's home, talking, just being together in a way of mutual friendship. And they stayed in relationship until that elder's death.

God moved through them in a way that I did not expect. And although not walking on water, it had hints of the miraculous.

When I began working on this sermon, I wrestled, wanting to share a story that was equally miraculous to Jesus' walking on water. But remembering and sharing stories of our own

lives that are smaller and equally unexpected, I believe, is vital to our call, no matter how large that miracle is. It helps us live the passage today.

When each of us shares our unexpected moments, it expands our understanding, our holy imagination, and our ability to see God.

And we share among all of the other voices that are not pointing to God—the headlines that overwhelm us, the hate, the isms—and say: 'Our God cannot be confined to this. God is greater.'

And this is good news. I hope you, too, will share your experiences this week.