

Today's Scripture reading is from the gospel of Matthew, and for the first time, we have some defensible speculation of what might have been unique about the apostle who wrote that gospel.

That's thanks to the video series, *The Chosen*, which recently began filming its 4<sup>th</sup> season, back in March. While the series presents some backstory of Jesus' ministry that goes beyond what the four gospels tell us, nothing I've seen contradicts the overall story of Jesus from the New Testament. And if nothing else, the show makes Jesus more accessible to today's audiences than any previous on-screen portrayal of him.

Unfortunately, the gospels don't give us a lot of information about Matthew, except that he was a tax collector who got up and left his employment when Jesus called him to be a follower. But the writers of *The Chosen* decided to depict Matthew, played by actor Paras Patel, as somewhere on the autism spectrum. He has some of the tics, anxieties and difficulties reading social cues sometimes seen in persons with autism, but he's quite able to function in society. He is exceptionally good with figures, has an excellent memory, and is very attentive to details.

The writers of the show apparently decided to portray Matthew on the spectrum, because the gospel attributed to him is longer, and more detailed than Mark's, and it contains minor details such as genealogies. His gospel includes more of what Jesus taught — including the Sermon on the Mount — than does Mark, which scholars believe was the first of the four gospels to be written.

During one scene, in an episode of *The Chosen* that shows the apostle John preparing to write his gospel, we witness him making notes and questioning his disciple colleagues about their memories of their time with Jesus. He asks them about when they first saw Jesus and Matthew, the former tax collector says, "It was

the fourth morning of the third week of the month of Adar, sometime during the second hour.” John responds, “It doesn’t have to be precise.”

“Why wouldn’t it need to be precise?” Matthew says, and then, apparently referring to his answer — or perhaps, even to the gospel account *he* is writing — Matthew adds, “Mine *will* be precise.”

Our reading for today — about Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee — is a case in point. It’s clear that Matthew has Mark’s record of this same incident before him as he writes, for there is similar vocabulary in both accounts. But if you know anything about the town locations in the Palestine of Jesus’ day, it becomes obvious that Mark’s account has what might be a geography error regarding where the boat was headed. The upshot is that when meticulous Matthew wrote his version, he corrected that error. As further evidence of Matthew’s precision, his account of the feeding of the 5,000 immediately precedes the Jesus-walking-on-the-water story. While all four gospels tell of Jesus feeding 5,000 people, it’s only precise Matthew who adds the “besides women and children” to the number being fed.

Mark and John also narrate the walking-on-water story, but it’s Matthew who adds the part about Peter getting out of the boat and attempting to walk to Jesus, and Jesus saving Peter when he starts to sink. In adding this to his account, Matthew moves it from a “Wow! Jesus can walk on water” amazement to a story about faith and trust. And only Matthew includes the statement that the waves were battering the boat. That’s a clue that there is a deeper story behind the surface one.

One of the most common symbols for the early church was a boat or ship on the water — and often pictured not on calm water but on rough seas. In fact, the word “nave,” which architecturally refers to the main portion of a church sanctuary, comes from the Latin word *navis*, which means ship. As people facing persecution because they were part of the church, Matthew’s readers understood

that their ship — the church — was being battered quite severely. In fact, the original Greek reads that the boat was “being tortured” by the waves.

After Jesus and Peter get into the boat and the wind ceases, Matthew says that the disciples worshiped Jesus and said to him, “Truly you are the son of God.” That reaction, however, is quite different from Mark’s and John’s reports. In Mark, far from declaring Jesus’ divine identity and worshiping him, the disciples are described as being astounded and having their hearts “hardened,” which probably meant their understanding of the meaning of what they had just witnessed — Jesus walking on water — was blocked. John’s version merely says that they reached the land toward which they had been aiming.

As we read the gospels overall, it’s uncertain that the disciples recognized Jesus’ identity as the Messiah that early in his ministry, so it’s possible that Matthew, in reporting the disciples worshiping Jesus as the Son of God, was drawing something that happened later back into this earlier incident. It is as if meticulous Matthew, with his 20/20 clarity of hindsight, is saying to his readers, “That Jesus is the Son of God is what we *should* have realized after seeing him walk on water, and so that is how I am narrating the story now.”

In so doing, he turns the incident from simply a slice of Jesus’ biography into a story meant to encourage early Christians, experiencing persecution, to cling to Jesus as Lord despite the hardships they were facing. That does not make Matthew a bad historian; it makes him a good preacher, for his purpose in writing was not to be a biographer of Jesus, or a historian of Christianity, but an evangelist for Jesus and His gospel.

Since Matthew has given us a fuller account, let’s briefly look at the two who walked on water early that morning. Picture it, the disciples were out to sea in more ways than one, with the wind blowing against them and the waves battering the boat. At this point, however, Matthew says nothing about them being afraid. In

fact, some of them at least were seasoned fishermen, and being out on rough water in strong wind was par for the course. As long as they stayed in the boat and worked together with the sails and the rudder and the oars, they had a reasonable chance of coming through the storm without too much damage.

What scares the wits out of them is seeing someone walking toward them on the water, and their first thought is that they are seeing a ghost! But then, Jesus speaks to them: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” All three of the gospel writers who record this incident agree on this point. What Jesus said is translated into English as “It is I.” In the Greek, however, what Jesus said is *ego eimi*, which is “I am.” So, what he said was: “Take heart, I am; do not be afraid.”

“I am” is the name God used for himself when, from the burning bush, God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. Moses asked God how he would identify him to his fellow Hebrews, and God responded, “I AM.” In quoting what Jesus said to the disciples, all three gospel writers were acknowledging something about Jesus’ divinity. Only in Matthew’s version, however, do the disciples seem to pick up on it, worshiping him as the Son of God.

But there is also another water-walker in today’s story, Peter. In Matthew, it is not Jesus who introduces the idea of Peter walking on water. Rather, it is Peter, who says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” In response, Jesus says, “Come,” giving Peter permission, but not pushing him to try it. That’s an important difference, for while there is some faith involved in Peter’s attempt to treat water like solid ground, there is also a good bit of skepticism. Peter is saying, in effect, “If it really is you, Jesus, make me able to walk on water. *Prove* that you truly are Jesus.” In other words, if Peter’s faith were stronger, he’d have stayed in the boat and believed that it was Jesus who was coming to him.

Ok, so what then is our take home for today? If we want to discover any message for ourselves in this story, it isn't: "If we have enough faith, we will be able to do things as miraculous as Jesus did!" No. Instead, it is believing that, despite the battering and the pounding we may experience during our time on this Earth, and how much deep water we find ourselves in, Christ comes to us in our daily lives as we live as part of the worshiping community.

After all, don't we sometimes feel as if we are living in a storm, where navigation is risky and troubles come at us in waves? In such times, the last thing we may expect is to see Jesus coming toward us. And even if we sense what might be his presence, we may, like Peter, want to ask him — if it really is him — to let us miraculously walk away from our problems.

We seldom get that kind of solution, however. Thankfully, though, Matthew the meticulous would most certainly remind us that it's better to ask Christ to join us in our shaky crafts on the stormy sea of life, then to brave the tempest and gales by ourselves. And, if we trust Jesus to sail with us, and to show us how to deal with the waves that batter our ship, we can be certain he'll help us land safely on heaven's shore. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.