

Denice Leslie  
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13<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
Matthew 14: 22 – 33

## “Big Wave Surfing”



I grew up in southern California near the beach and so naturally I spent a lot of time there. Body surfing was great fun. But what I really wanted to do was surf! Unfortunately I had developed a bad knee from playing tennis by the time I was fifteen and knew I didn't have the athleticism required—skate boarding and body surfing were about my speed!



But I've been blessed with a nephew who has got to be the poster boy of surfing—tall, broad shouldered, athletic ( and Surfer Boy of the 60's blue eyed and blond to boot, ) Jon loves surfing.

He shared a couple of his surf cult movies with me this summer: The History of Surfing and

Big Wave Surfing. Personally, I recommend the movie Blue Crush for inspiration for us girls, but the other two were fabulous!

(movie)



Watching these films I found myself mesmerized by the huge curling walls of water crashing down—tons and tons and tons of water with a force I can't begin to fathom. And the aerial views of the surfers out there on their little splinters of fiberglass and wood racing along these humungous walls of rushing water— of accelerating power curling all around them and finally crashing down into a pounding avalanche over them,—I waited with heart stopping tension—holding my breath, eyes wide--when a few moments later the surfer appears through the blanket of swirling mist --still upright on the board and gliding along!

Wow! My relief is palpable and my joy complete as if the surfer were a conquering hero, I shout “Yes!” And pound the air! Wave after wave after wave....watching as the knights of the surf continue their quest for the next big and even bigger wave.

What is it that drives the big wave surfers? The risk, the fear, the thrill—the challenge? Or is it simply all summed up in the desire to experience the wave itself—that amazing power larger than oneself that provides this hurtling amazing aquamarine wall of speed that is at the same time a oneness with the very power of creation!



I've always loved the sea—its vastness, its changing colors, tides and gifts. Even getting caught up in an unexpected wave and rolling around in the surf ---The lovely salty refreshment and the wind, sun and sand. When I pastored in Indiana I was so homesick for the ocean—being away from it was like claustrophobic. So finally we went to Lake Michigan. And it has wave action! And its beautiful and there is even sand along some shores—but you know what—it's a lake—and there is no salt smell, and its well, a very poor substitute. The experience was like totally flat, powerless and not rejuvenating at all.

I mean I shouldn't make comparisons, right? The Pacific Ocean is a jewel beyond compare.

In scriptures the ocean is usually a metaphor for chaos, danger and a great overpowering life threatening devouring maw eliciting the same kind of fear the thought of the The Great White Shark generates in me.

Noah and the flood is a story of the power of the water to destroy and wipe out all living things. The tsunami and the Katrina hurricanes bear witness to the truth of this fear.

But when I see the waves I see an organized power of pristine beauty of power and purpose that cannot be thwarted. I see the chaotic waters of the Beginning organized into creation by the hand of God—the power harnessed for God's purposes. No wonder Peter wanted to come out on the water with Jesus! In spite of the fact that he feared the chaos and power of the storm, he wanted to experience what Jesus was experiencing.

He wanted to be out there riding the wave with him. He wanted to a part of whatever God had in mind—not just vicariously like me watching the surfing movies safe in my arm chair

in front of the TV set. Peter wanted a tow out to the Big Wave so he to could be one with and part of the transforming power of God!



Jesus is a Big Wave Surfer. Yes—he's the true conquering hero over the chaos. It's his walk on the water that reveals the power of God that is so much greater than ourselves—that power which is at work in the world with or without us!

One of my favorite theologians, Richard Niehbur, speaks of God the Bulldozer. His premise is that we can either get on board with what God is doing in this world for redemption or we can refuse.

If we go with God then we become apart of the movement of God that will not, indeed, cannot be thwarted. But if we cower or ignore or deny, well then—what is the consequence of standing in front of an oncoming bulldozer? You get run over—not because God is mean or doesn't care, or is arbitrary or punishing but because we have a choice about it –God gives us a choice. There are two powers in the world: the power of chaos and the power of creation. You choose.

Jesus invites us to get out of our familiar boats and join him on the water.



Like Peter, we may sink—but only when we turn our eyes away from God's larger

purpose. When that happens—what happens? What does Jesus do?

Tell me? (wait for response). Yes! Jesus picks us up! Reaches out his hand and lifts us back up out of the sinking waves.

And look at how he does it: He doesn't watch Peter as he sinks, put his hands on his hips and shake his head as he says, "O ye of little faith!" And then when Peter is going down for the third time, rescue him reluctantly. No! Jesus immediately reaches out for Peter, his first impulse is rescuing love—no questions asked.

His response follows the rescue, not as hard rebuke but as encouragement—"Peter, my big hearted, impulsive friend! Your heart is in the right place, But you've got to remember not to take your eyes off of what God is doing, stay focused on me---that's right---trust me, have faith and you too will ride the Big Wave of God's transforming power.<sup>1</sup>

We are Peter—he is all of us who want to follow Jesus—all of us disciples who are cowering in the boat when the storms of life threaten—when anxiety threatens to engulf us but God is out there calling us to join him on the seas. We may look up and think we see a ghost—but if we take a good look we'll hear Jesus calling out to us and recognize his presence.

We are so safe these days as Christians. We have our scientific world view and unfortunately we truly believe we can explain it all away –or make sense of the powers that be, the organizing principles, the elements and physics of it all. How glib of us! The truth is lives are transformed in miraculous ways by the touch of the power of God and we *can't* explain it. We can't put it in a text book and read about it and then put it safely back on the shelf.

That makes us very uncomfortable. We don't like living with the unknowable, the overpowering. We prefer to be in control. And yet there are powers in the universe deeper than we can perceive. "There are moments in the

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<sup>1</sup> Ideas from Jan Richards' Painted Prayer Book reflections for this Sunday re: Jesus reaching for Peter before he speaks to him and Peter's character.

interplay of divine call and human response which enable bursts of power or unexpected feats of healing or transformation to occur.

Our vision of the world, both personally and theologically, is usually too small to contain God's vision for ourselves or the future.

Indeed, the world revealed by scientists and medical researchers today opens the door for miraculous events as revelations of deeper, but natural, energies within our lives that promote acts of healing, courage, and transformation.

[We can ride these waves if we join Jesus]-We can choose to align ourselves with God's vision for wholeness and expect great things from ourselves, our churches, and God. [We don't have to let fear or comfort control the motive for our decisions].

In so doing, we may discover that the "natural" is far more mysterious and lively than we had imagined!"<sup>2</sup>

The only truly life giving control I know of people is trust. Trusting Mother Nature doesn't work. Trusting our fear certainly leads to life denying reactivity. Trusting other people isn't reliable 100% of the time....When we look at them we see our own swirl of desires (<sup>3</sup>) and the resulting chaos pulls us off track and out of wack more often than not—"Jesus comes walking right over that swirl of desires with the loving desire from God that can help us rise above the effects of that chaos."<sup>4</sup>

So that leaves only one reliable source in the midst of uncertainty: Trust in God. Trust in Jesus Christ. It's an old song—and you know it:

*Put your hand in the hand of the man that stilled the waters, put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea—and you will look at others differently—(if you ) put our hand in the hand of the man from Galilee!*

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<sup>2</sup> Process Thought for these lections, textweek.com.

<sup>3</sup> Giardian commentary on how the human swirl of desires and chaos leads to violence and scapegoating as we compete with each other for security and resources.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

When we focus on Jesus, we can look at our brothers and sisters and see them differently. We can see how they and we are all made in the image of God.

Not only is God trustworthy, but God is power-worthy. Jesus' gives us power—power to surf the big waves of life and inspire others to join us out there as well.

Power not to harness but be apart of the on-going ordering of creation—

---God's big beautiful wave gathering power and water and momentum with us shooting the pipe of God's grace—on the faith-board of God's sustaining love! Surfing across the chaos of life brining God's beauty, order and clarity and power to bear on ours and others lives.

Will there be wipe outs? Sure there will be! That's life! But Jesus is always there with the tow rope on the jet ski to pull us back up and back out for another ride saying, "Don't be afraid. Take heart—Give me your hand--I'm here!"  
Thanks be to God!