

On the Water

Scripture Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Lesson Synopsis: Students will be invited to explore the story of Jesus walking on the water. Of special importance will be themes of Jesus' divinity, the difficulties of discipleship, and Peter's display faith (and lack thereof) in walking to Jesus on the water. Participants will be challenged to know the scriptures, be loyal to Jesus despite hardship, and exercise faith as they follow Jesus.

Digging In

Setting the Stage

In Matthew, the story of Jesus walking on the water comes at the end of a very long day that began in 14:13. There, Jesus hears of the death of the John the Baptist, who was beheaded at the order of Herod the Tetrarch. Upon hearing this gruesome news, Jesus "withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place." While the text does not give any explicit reason for Jesus' withdrawal other than his receiving word of John's death, two theories may be set forth. First, Jesus withdrew *by boat* rather than simply finding a solitary place on foot. Some commentators interpret this as Jesus crossing "to the other side of the lake, where Herod Antipas has no authority."ⁱ According to this reading, Jesus distanced himself from Herod's hostility. Second, Jesus withdrew *privately*. Because privacy was not necessary to distancing himself from Herod, it seems that news of John's death prompted Jesus to seek time alone, possibly due to grief. It is important here to remember that Jesus was not immune to grief or to the events that cause it. As we visit Jesus on this day, we find him receiving the bad news of the death of a fellow servant of God and seeking time alone away from hostility.

Though Jesus seeks privacy, his fame undermines this desire. 14:13 tells us, "Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns." By the time his boat lands, a large crowd has already gathered in anticipation of Jesus' arrival. It is here that we see the compassion of Jesus on full display. Although the crowd has interrupted Jesus' search for privacy, "he ha[s] compassion on them and heal[s] their sick" (14:14) and cares for their hunger at the famous "feeding of the five thousand." All of this requires his attention until evening. Then, having attended to the crowd in these various ways, Jesus orders his disciples back into the same boat in which they had arrived and tells them "to go on ahead of them to the other side" (4:22). He then

dismisses the crowd and ascends a mountain for a solitary time of prayer. Though his desire for privacy has been delayed, Jesus finds time for it now and engages in prayer for much of the night.ⁱⁱ

Jesus on the Water

While the disciples might have preferred to stay with Jesus, we find in 14:22 that Jesus was forceful in his demand that they go ahead of him to the other side of the lake. The Greek word used here is *anagkazo*, which can be translated as “to force,” “to compel,” or “to urge strongly.” Having been so strongly compelled, the disciples have obediently gone ahead and now find themselves in difficulty. By the fourth watch of the night (between 3 and 6am), they have yet to reach their destination due to high wind and waves. Several commentators note that the Greek word translated variously as “buffeted” (NIV), “tossed” (KJV), and “battered” (NASB) to describe the effect of the waves on the boat is more literally rendered as “tormented.”ⁱⁱⁱ The disciples find themselves making little progress as the waves “torment” their boat. It is into this context of struggle that Jesus will visit them walking on the water.

While Jesus’ water walk is no doubt miraculous, its significance stretches far beyond the performance of an impossible feat. Indeed, the water walk functions as nothing less than an explanation of Jesus’ identity. To grasp the story on this level, the reader must identify the many Old Testament allusions contained in this passage. As Craig Keener explains, “By treading on the sea, Jesus now takes a role that the Hebrew Bible has reserved for God alone (Job 9:8; cf. also Ps 77:19; Hab 3:15). Commentators also often recognize Jesus’ deity in his “It is I” in 14:27, which literally declares ‘I am.’”^{iv} Thus, the story of Jesus walking on water is replete with Old Testament imagery that equates him with God. Perhaps the two most glaring allusions are to Job 9 (“[God] alone ... treads on the waves of the sea.”) and Ex 3:14 (“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’”). In walking on the water, Jesus does what Job says only God can do and names himself as God in saying, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid!” As Keener has already noted, a more literal translation of this exhortation is, “Take courage! I AM! Don’t be afraid.” In walking on the water, Jesus tells those familiar with the scriptures something about himself. He is far more than simply a great healer or preacher. In this passage, Jesus claims for himself divinity.

Peter on the Water

While we the readers know that it is Jesus walking on the water, we can perhaps forgive the disciples for missing this when they first see a lone figure on the waves. This, after all, is no ordinary occurrence. Not sure what to think, the disciples are terrified and assume that Jesus is a ghost (14:26). Jesus is quick to comfort them,

though. “Take courage! I AM,” he says. “Don’t be afraid.” Taking these words to heart, Peter now makes a startling request: “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water” (14:28).

While some commentators understand Peter’s request negatively,^v it should be noted that Jesus himself offers no correction or rebuke.^{vi} Instead, Jesus welcomes this request with a simple, “Come.” To this point, we have already seen Jesus empower his disciples to do the things that he is doing (see ch 11 where Jesus gives them “authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” and sends them out to preach the kingdom). Now, Peter, playing the part of a disciple intent on imitating his master, makes a bold request to do more of the same. As Mounce explains, Peter’s request is not so much a test as it is an entreaty: “*Since it is you, please enable me to do the same thing that you are doing* better captures the intent of Peter’s request.”^{vii}

Having heard Jesus’ summons, Peter gets out of the boat, presumably no easy task when the boat was being “tormented” by the waves (see above), and begins to walk on the water to Jesus. To this point, Peter has shown extraordinary boldness and faith, but it is only a few steps before things change. Ever since he mistook Jesus for a ghost on the water, Peter’s focus has been solely on his Lord. In fear, he cried out when he saw the ghostly figure. In faith, he made his request and climbed out of the boat. Now, as he walks on the water, Peter’s focus wavers. Becoming aware of the wind, he begins to sink and is swift to cry out for help, “Lord, save me!” In response, Jesus “immediately” catches Peter and chastises him by saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (14:31).

While we may be tempted to focus solely on Jesus’ rebuke, it is important to note the things that Peter got right in this story. First, he displayed great faith in seeking to imitate Jesus. It is no small thing to climb out of a boat onto a stormy sea, and Peter alone among the disciples dares to do so! Second, while Peter’s water walk is short, he knows to whom to direct his plea for help after losing focus.^{viii} Peter’s fault, then, is not a complete lack of faith. Instead, it is faith that wavers in the face of trouble. As Keener explains, “Peter’s failure came as he observed the wind (14:30), looking to the natural circumstances rather than to God’s power that was sustaining him.”^{ix} After Peter exercises faith to get out of the boat, he learns of an area where his faith is lacking as he walks on the waves.

In response to Peter’s sinking, Jesus chides him for his lack of faith, and we are left to imagine the tone of voice in which this rebuke was given. Was Jesus disappointed and frustrated at Peter’s lack of faith, or did he offer the rebuke in love? In seeking an answer to this question, we can look to Jesus’ demeanor in the rest of the story. Notice, for instance, that Jesus “immediately” caught hold of Peter when he called for help. Peter does not need to get Jesus’ attention, nor does he have to wait for Jesus to get around to helping him, as if Jesus might want to teach him a lesson by letting him splutter in the waves for a while. No, while Peter has lost sight of Jesus,

Jesus has not lost sight of Peter, and he responds with immediate care when he hears Peter's cry. With this in mind, I prefer to join Keener in calling Jesus' words a gentle reproof to his disciple.^x Hearing Peter's faith-filled request, Jesus encourages that faith by calling Peter to come to him on the water. Then, when Peter sinks, Jesus chides him for losing faith. Peter's sinking becomes a teachable moment as Jesus urges him to consider the reasons for his doubt.

Worship in the Boat

After the drama of Peter's walking and sinking and Jesus' swift rescue, the two water walkers climb into the boat with the remaining disciples. Perhaps discerning the allusions to the Old Testament conjured by Jesus' stroll on the water (see above), the disciples now name Jesus correctly in saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (14:33). And they offer the only proper response to one so great: worship.

Application

Scripture

In seeking application points for this passage, we can begin first by noting the importance of scriptural literacy among the people of God. As noted in the "Jesus on the Water" section above, Jesus' water walk is understandable only as we become aware of the Old Testament allusions that it employs. When we remember that only God is able to walk on the water in the book of Job and that Jesus employs language from the burning bush when he says "I AM," we become aware that Jesus is doing something more than a simple miracle in this passage. Indeed, he is displaying his divinity to those who know the scriptures well.

On one level, this insight challenges us to know the scriptures in order to be better students of those same scriptures. This is not the only place in the New Testament where the Old Testament is referenced, and we will only catch these allusions as we come to know the Bible better. As we continue to learn the story of scripture, we will begin to see connections and continuity that is hidden to those who only pay scripture a passing glance.

On another level, this insight challenges us to consider the importance of scripture for life in general. The disciples, after all, are not reading this story. They are experiencing it, and an understanding of scripture is needed for them to rightly interpret this moment in their lives. The same will often be true for Christians today. As we become students of scripture, we allow it to shape the way we think and see the

world, and different life-experiences take on new meaning in its light. Thus, scripture learning strengthens our understandings of both scripture itself and life.

Difficult Discipleship

A second point of application comes with a look at the disciples struggling in the windstorm. Their presence in this undesirable place is directly related to their obedience to Jesus. By sending them ahead of him, Jesus himself sent the disciples into difficulty. Keener offers great insight here in saying, "...[the passage] suggests that just because disciples face difficulties does not mean that Jesus is not the one who sent them."^{xi} As we consider this passage, we learn that following Jesus, while utterly worthwhile, can at times be difficult.

Through the centuries, interpreters have understood the boat in this passage to be symbolic of the church, which adds another layer to the insight above. In this light, the Church finds itself in difficulty as it is "tormented" by the waves of the world precisely because of its loyalty to Jesus. It is in the midst of this tumult, though, that the Church experiences Jesus as Lord as he walks to her on the water. Moreover, the passage points to Jesus' control even in these uncertain circumstances. As soon as he enters the boat, the wind and waves die down. The Church, then, is encouraged to loyalty and faith even in the face of difficulty.

Imitating the Master

As noted above, Peter in this story plays the part of the disciple intent on imitating his master – even to the point of attempting the impossible! While walking on water is particular to Peter's story, his attitude is instructive for all disciples of Jesus. To follow Jesus is to commit ourselves to living out his teachings and imitating his example, and doing these things requires faith. In faith, we can seek to forgive as Jesus forgave. In faith, we can seek to value the least even as Jesus did. In faith, we can choose to follow the example of Jesus through service. In faith, we can take Jesus seriously when he challenges our commitments to wealth and possessions. And the list goes on. While taking these steps of faith might seem to pale in comparison to walking on a stormy sea, we should be careful not to treat them as inconsequential. Ultimately, discipleship is the continuing process of trusting Jesus with our lives, and doing so requires that we step out on faith again and again, choosing to value the word and example of Jesus over the wisdom of the world. To follow Jesus, we might say, is a lifelong faith walk on the sometimes stormy waters of life.

Of course, Peter's example also shows us that we won't always get things just right. Though he displayed tremendous faith in his request and first steps on the water, it was not long before the challenges of the situation caused Peter's faith to

waver and he began to sink. It is encouraging here to note Jesus' reaction. Upon hearing Peter's call for help, Jesus "immediately" came to his aid. In this we see that Jesus is no passive spectator in our walks of faith. Indeed, he is the one who calls us to come, and he is the one who is swift to hear our calls. Faith walks can be hard, but this passage reminds us that we do not walk alone. We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, and Jesus stands as the great High Priest who empathizes with our weaknesses and who therefore makes us bold to approach the throne of God to "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:14-16). To walk on the waters of life in faith is also to trust in the continued work of the Savior in our lives.

Even as we see Jesus' swift rescue, we also hear his gentle rebuke concerning Peter's lack of faith. In this, we can see Jesus diagnosing the root of Peter's failure and challenging him to think on his experience. As we have noted, Peter displays much faith throughout the passage, but it flags when he sees the waves. In offering this rebuke, Jesus challenges Peter to greater faith in the future and lets him know that the impossible is possible when the call of Jesus meets the faith of the disciple. Like Peter, we will also sometimes receive rebukes from Jesus in the form of insight or conviction. In these moments, we should remember that Jesus is pulling to a better place through his rebuke rather than seeking to sink us in our failure. In a sense, we might say that Peter is flexing his faith muscles in the passage and that Jesus is helping him to become stronger. Even as we approach the throne of grace with confidence, we should also be open to hearing the rebukes of the master that call us to a different future.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "Duke or Carolina and why?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week's readings in the gospel of Matthew that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today's lesson will come from Tuesday's reading and will focus on Matthew 14:22-33, where Jesus and Peter walk on the water. Invite students to open their Bibles to that passage.

Jesus on the Water

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask someone to read Matthew 14:22-27.
- **Walking Through the Passage**
 - **Question:** Ask participants to identify the setting of the story. What stories come before it? What has been happening in Jesus' life and the life of his disciples?
 - Be ready to explain Jesus' long day (see the "Setting the Stage" section for more on this).
 - **Question:** Why does Jesus send his disciples ahead of him?
 - **Question:** What kind of progress do the disciples make throughout the night? Why are they having so much trouble?
 - This may be a good place to talk about the waves "tormenting" the boat in order to show the strength of the windstorm. (See the "Jesus on the Water" section above.)
 - **Question:** What is the root cause of the disciples' difficulty?
 - Be prepared here to talk about the difficulties that loyalty to Jesus can bring. (See "Difficult Discipleship" section above.)
 - **Question:** Ask participants to imagine that they are in a boat being "tormented" by waves and are making slow progress. Suddenly, they see a figure walking to them on the water. What is their first reaction?
 - **Question:** How do the disciples react to Jesus?
 - **Question:** How does Jesus respond to the disciples' fear?
- **The Significance of Water Walking**
 - **Question:** Why does it matter that Jesus walked on the water.
 - **Explain:** Explain that there is more going on here than Jesus simply taking a shortcut to his disciples' boat, though that is amazing in itself.
 - **Scripture Reading:** Ask someone to read Job 9:8.
 - **Question:** How does this passage relates to today's passage?
 - **Scripture Reading:** Ask someone to read Exodus 3:14.
 - **Explain:** Explain that Jesus' words to his disciples can also be translated as "Take courage. I AM. Don't be afraid."
 - **Question:** With these Old Testament connections in mind, what is Jesus doing as he walks on the water?
- **Application Point:** In walking on the water, Jesus is making a statement about his identity, but this is only apparent to those who are acquainted with the scriptures. In the same way, it is important for us to know the scriptures in our life of faith. (See "Scripture" section above for more on this.)

Peter on the Water

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask someone to read 14:28-33.

- **Question:** What is Peter’s request?
- **Question:** Why do you think Peter wanted to walk on the water? Is this a good or bad thing?
 - Be ready to talk about Peter’s desire to imitate Jesus (See the “Peter on the Water” section above).
- **Question:** What kind of faith do you think it takes to make this request and then to climb out of the boat?
- **Question:** Why does Peter’s faith waver?
- **Question:** Ask if anyone would like to share a time when they felt God calling them to take a step of faith. How did it feel? How did it turn out?
- **Question:** In what other ways might Jesus call us to take steps of faith today?
 - See “Imitating the Master” section above for more on this.
- **Question:** Why might our own faith waver?
- **Question:** What is Jesus’ reaction to Peter’s lack of faith and ensuing failure?
 - Be ready to note that Jesus rescues Peter immediately.
- **Question:** How do you think Jesus said, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” What was his tone of voice?
- **Question:** How do you think Jesus reacts to us when our own faith wavers?
- **Application Point:** While we don’t walk on water, Jesus often calls us to take steps of faith in our discipleship. Like Peter, we may waver, but Jesus is with us and points us to a better future when we fail. (See “Imitating the Master” section for more on this.)

ⁱ Eugene M. Boring and Leander E. Keck, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” vol. 8, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1995), 323. See also Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, *The New American Commentary* v. 22 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1992), 231. Both Boring and Blomberg note a theme of Jesus withdrawing from conflict throughout Matthew. Boring goes a step further than Blomberg in arguing that Jesus “demonstrates the nature of his kingship by withdrawing,” thus pointing to a theme of nonviolence.

ⁱⁱ Blomberg notes that the same wording, “*kai idian*” (privately; by himself), is used in both 14:13 and 14:23, thus tying the passages together. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 234.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*; David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1999), 160.

^{iv} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 406. In this passage, Keener points to Matthew’s source material in Mark, which allows him to also point to Exodus 33:22, which speaks of God’s glory “passing by” Moses, as a further allusion to Jesus’ divinity. Mark’s account of the water walk includes the detail, “He was about to pass them by” (Mark 6:48).

^v Boring and Keck, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” 328; Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 160. Boring and Garland both look to the traditional interpretation of the boat as representing the Church (Garland is speculative here rather than making a strong point). If this is the case, then Peter’s getting out of the boat would represent his leaving the community of faith in order to test Jesus. As Garland says, “If one considers the boat to be a symbol of the church, as interpreters have done from the beginning, it seems that disciples belong in the boat rather than trying to walk on water to prove to themselves and to others who Jesus is.” While this is a plausible point, it would seem that it is possible for the story to function on several levels, with one referring to the church in the tumult of the world and a second looking to an example of faith and discipleship.

^{vi} Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 407: “Although the proposal that Peter walk on water was first Peter’s idea (14:28), Jesus’ response indicates that he approved of it (14:29).”

^{vii} Blomberg, *Matthew*, 235.

^{viii} Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 407.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 406.