

“Walking on Someone Else’s Turf”

August 9, 2026

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Since we are outside today, subject to whatever the weather wants to do to us, it seems fitting that our Bible story be an outside story as well, subject to whatever the weather wanted to do to them. As Mark said when introducing the Scripture, our story comes immediately after Jesus has fed 5,000 men plus women and children with 5 small loaves of bread and a couple fish. An unbelievable story, but one of the only ones included in all four gospels. Jesus’ disciples had been working hard, not only distributing the fish and bread to 5,000 plus people, but collecting 12 baskets full of leftovers. After their hard day’s work, it says Jesus “made” them get in the boat and start for the other side while He dismissed the crowd and then took some private time with God. But the wind was not in the disciples’ favor. The disciples knew what they were doing – they had several experienced fishermen in their midst who made their living navigating the waves. Yet there was a persistent headwind along with all the waves that come with it. They were not making much progress.

Of course, this is not surprising. Remember throughout the Bible, oceans and seas are the dwelling place of chaos, evil spirits, and parts of creation that were not called into order by God. From the first chapter of Genesis when God’s Spirit moved over the waters of chaos and brought forth light, land and life, to the story from Mark 5 when Jesus cast a legion of demons from a person into a herd of swine, and the swine ran straight off a cliff and into the sea to bring the demons home, to the book of Revelation where every monster comes out of the sea to wreak chaos on humanity; the sea is the home of evil spirits set on human destruction.

So it is no surprise that these disciples who are trying to follow Jesus’ instructions are met with resistance by the sea. They have been rowing and paddling and fighting the winds and waves all evening and through the night when suddenly they see a ghostly figure approaching them and they are afraid. You bet they are afraid. They are claiming the safety of the boat while crossing over evil’s home turf, but an evil ghost doesn’t have to respect the sides of a boat like the water does. Then Jesus says, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus says, “Come” and you know the rest of the story. Peter gets out of the boat, walks on the water a little bit, gets overwhelmed by the wind and the waves, starts to sink, cries out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus does. They get in the boat and wind and waves calm down.

It is an awesome story. But what is it about? What are we supposed to glean from it? I once received the blessing of hearing John Ortberg focus our story on Peter. He later wrote a book on it entitled “If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat”. He says this is

a story about stepping out in faith. It is about answering Jesus' invitation to "Come". It's about finding the courage to swing our legs over the side of the boat and step out to what God is calling us to. Is Jesus calling you to the ministry or the mission field? Is the call to start a new ministry right where we are? Is it to share our faith with that neighbor or co-worker? Jesus is calling, and where Jesus calls us, Jesus will make a way. Peter walked on the water because Jesus called him and therefore Jesus made it happen. But be aware of doubts and distraction. Never mind the waves splashing on your shins. Keep your eyes on Jesus. You can do it. And even if you do start to sink, you walked on water. Like Peter, it may have only been a few steps, but you walked on water. And that changes a person. "Take heart," Jesus says. "Do not be afraid." It is time to step out in faith.

That is really good stuff, but it is not the only way to read this passage. Notice when Peter got back in the boat, there are no high-fives, no "that-a-boys", no "I wish I would have had the courage to do that". That is because in some ways, Peter did bad. When they see Jesus coming to them, walking on the water, Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter responded to Him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you." That line from Peter, "Lord, if it is you," followed by a request sounds familiar. It sounds like a conversation Jesus had back at the beginning of His ministry while in the wilderness. Then it was satan who said, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." And again, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down" and let the angels catch you. Peter's words sound just like the end of Jesus' ministry when He was being mocked by the crowds, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Peter saying, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you" is demanding proof that Jesus is who He says He is, making Jesus conform to Peter's expectations, defining what Jesus should and should not do, trying to control Jesus – not good. The other disciples did not ask Jesus to jump through their hoops, and they believed. They simply stayed in the boat. A boat or ship was one of the earliest symbols of Christianity – specifically standing for the Church. If we were inside the sanctuary, I would have you look up and see how our ceiling is intentionally designed to look like the hull of a ship. It was the ship that kept the disciples safe when crossing chaos' turf. It was staying in the ship that got them from one place of ministry – the feeding of the 5,000 plus – to the next place of ministry – where those who simply touched the fringe of Jesus' cloak were healed. Faithful followers are found in the boat, with the disciples who were doing what Jesus asked them to do, pulling on their oars against the relentless headwind that is the evil of our world. Jesus said, "Take heart... Don't be afraid." "Take heart," literally "grab your heart". Grab hold of the parts of you that feel like they are about to explode and talk them through their anxiety to restore them to a place of calmness. Grab your heart when it feels like it is being pulled out of your chest by fear and worry. "Take heart. Don't be afraid." Pull on your oar. I am here.

Two radically different understandings of what this story means. And I think they are both true. Here and there, every now and again, the church needs visionaries and courageous folks

who step out in faith to do some new and bold thing. To get out of the boat and step out in faith. But there are far more times when we are called to stay in the boat that is the church we know and love, stay in the boat and faithfully pull on your oar against the winds that howl, knowing Jesus is near.

Both of these interpretations can be true because they both revolve around the central truth of our story – who Jesus is. Jesus walks on the water to catch up with the disciples who are fighting chaos' forces. Jesus comes to them where they are. When they see Him, they are afraid, but He says, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." A more accurate translation of "It is I" would simply be "I am". The very name of God. The name God gave Moses when he asked for God's name. The very name "Yahweh" that is so holy that our Jewish brothers and sisters refuse to say it or write it casually, so our Old Testament uses the word "LORD" in all capital letters whenever the name appears. Jesus has just said, "I am God." Jesus is God. He has just proven He is more powerful than anything in our world by feeding 5,000 plus with 5 loaves and 2 fish with 12 baskets of leftovers. He has just walked all over the enemy's stronghold without even getting His robe wet. And just in case the disciples and others don't get it, Jesus just says it, "I Am" – Yahweh, God, I Am.

That is the central truth here. Birger Gerhardsson literally counted the words of this story in the original Greek and noted Jesus' words "I AM" are the exact center of this story. In one of her sermons on this passage, Barbara Brown Taylor says if there is a miracle worth savoring in this story, it's probably not Jesus' walking on water, because God can do stuff like that. And it is not that Peter was able to momentarily repeat the trick. God can make that happen too. The miracle to savor is when it was all said and done, a seawater sputtering Peter and boat's worth of disciples realized Jesus wasn't just a good guy. He wasn't just a good speaker who could pull off some cool healing and feeding tricks. Somehow, out there, in the middle of nowhere, floating around in the dead of night; a boat, or a church, full of disciples realized God was with them. V. 33 "And those in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God." They looked past themselves, past what they thought they knew, and "worshiped Him, saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God.'"

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