

Simon Walks on Water
TEXT: Matthew 14:22-33
Words for kids:

PHBF 6.19.11
Scr. Reading: Mt 14:22-33
The Life of Simon Peter

Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow."

"Is it steady or moving astern?" the captain called out.

The lookout replied, "Steady, Captain," which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, "Signal that ship: 'We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.'"

Back came the signal, "Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees."

The captain said, "Send: 'I'm a captain, change course twenty degrees.'"

"I'm a seaman second-class," came the reply. "You had better change course twenty degrees."

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send: 'I'm a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.'"

Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

We changed course.

~ Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Word Publishing, 1991, p. 153

Sometimes all it takes to know what you should do is a clear understanding of who you are dealing with. That's the principle illustrated in this incident between Peter and Jesus. Once Peter understands who Jesus is, he knows exactly how he should act and think.

Last week we began a short study on the life of Simon Peter. We saw that one of the main reasons so much of the Bible is written in story form is that we need stories to help us comprehend the abstract terms and concepts so central to Christianity: Abraham helps us understand faith, Moses helps us understand slavery and deliverance, Simon Peter helps us understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

One of the key questions in the gospels – one of the key questions we

have to answer if we are going to be a follower of Jesus – is "Who is He?" When we understand Him properly, our role as His follower becomes much more clear.

This should be no surprise to us. It shouldn't surprise us that this study of Peter is really a roundabout way of studying Jesus. "The ultimate reason for getting to know Peter is so together we might better know Jesus. For the story of Peter is the story of Jesus." (M. Card, *Stone*, 23)

Three of the gospel writers tell us the story of Jesus walking on the water: Matthew, Mark, and John. We'll pick up a few details from the other two writers, but we're going to spend most of our time in Matthew, since he's the only one who tells us the part about Peter jumping out of the boat and walking on the water with Jesus.

WHO JESUS IS NOT (vv 22-23)

We pick up the story in verse 22: "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat..." Why? Notice what precedes this incident (v 21): Jesus feeds 5000 men, plus women and children. (How about that for a Father's Day lunch?)

Immediately Jesus puts the disciples on a boat and then dismisses the crowd Himself. John tells us why:

John 6:14-15 *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

The crowd wanted to make Jesus king. Why? Because they saw the OT significance of this miracle. Jesus wasn't merely reacting to the need of the crowd for food. He was making a statement about His identity. These people had seen this before—a great prophet leading people into the wilderness and miraculously providing bread for them all. That very thing had been done by Moses, and Moses had predicted that another great prophet like himself would someday come and lead the people (Dt 18:15ff). By leading these people into the wilderness and feeding them there, Jesus was subtly but unmistakably claiming to be the prophet like

Moses. This is what the people mean: “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” (Jn 6:14) They are correct about who He is. But they are mistaken about why He has come: “They were about to come and take him by force” (v 15).

They thought Jesus was there to become their political deliverer. They saw the Messiah as a national, military-type hero. They were moving toward that frenzied mob experience where everyone moves en masse and no one stops to think. Jesus didn’t want the disciples caught up in that, so He gets them out of there. The disciples shared the mindset and expectations of the crowd, and Jesus needed to isolate them so He could clarify who He really was.

Does this happen today? In our lives and culture?

- Political Jesus – Jesus is the answer to reclaim America. Christians view themselves primarily a massive voting block with a certain political agenda. Our strategies are boycotts, lobbyists, and media events. In essence, Jesus becomes the founder and leader of an American special interest group called Christianity.
- Vending Machine Jesus – Jesus is the answer to all my felt needs and problems. Lack peace? Try Jesus. It’s basically a paraphrase of every product ad on the market. We’ve just swapped Jesus in for cosmetic surgery or a new pickup truck. It even happens at the personal level, when I get frustrated with Jesus when He doesn’t immediately satisfy all my desires and needs. We need to be reminded that Jesus isn’t a vending machine and following Him is not the same as living the American Dream.
- Effeminate Jesus – a nice, gentle guy in sandals and a robe, gently reminding people to love each other.

Finally He gets the crowd to disperse, and in verse 23, Jesus heads up into the hills to pray. You wonder if this was Jesus’ way of seeking the fortitude to resist the siren song of the crowd – praying to keep His identity and mission clear in His own heart. He was certainly praying that it would become clear to His disciples.

WHO JESUS IS (vv 23b-27)

[Read vv 23b-26.]

Roman reckoning divides the night into 4 watches of 3 hours each, beginning at 6 PM. “The fourth watch” would have been 3-6 AM. Picture the scene: 4 in the morning, moonlight filtering through the clouds, perhaps lightening. Men are laboring to row into the wind, suddenly become aware of another presence on the sea. Not another boat, but a singular physical presence, shrouded in darkness, striding over the heaving waves. Eerie. Frightening. Terrifying. Jewish superstition held that the spirits of the dead roamed across large, wide-open regions like as deserts and oceans. Suddenly, these brave men started shouting in fear—curses, prayers, who knows what.

Mark 6:48 gives us a very important detail: “he meant to pass by them.” Why? At the least, we should conclude that Jesus had some different goal for this miracle than merely getting to the disciples in the boat. Is he taking the more efficient mode of travel (the boat is struggling to make headway – why not keep on walking!)?

Like so many incidents in the life of Jesus, we understand this scene better through the lens of the OT. The OT frequently describes God as the one who can tread on the sea:

Job 9:5-8 ⁵ he who removes mountains, and they know it not, when he overturns them in his anger, ⁶ who shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble; ⁷ who commands the sun, and it does not rise; who seals up the stars; ⁸ who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea...

Psalm 77:16-19 ¹⁶ When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled. ¹⁷ The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side. ¹⁸ The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook. ¹⁹ Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen.

Jesus goal in walking on the water wasn’t to get out to them in their boat. His goal was to show them who He is. By feeding the 5000, Jesus was making a claim to be the prophet greater than Moses. Now, by walking on the water during a storm, Jesus is making another claim. This

time He's not simply a prophet like Moses; He's God Himself.

Notice Jesus' words in verse 27: "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Jesus literally says, "Be of good courage. I AM. Do not fear." He takes the divine name on Himself to calm their fears. "I AM is with you in this storm. Do not be afraid." This is not just a miracle story; it's a moment of divine revelation.

Like a skilled movie director, Matthew now turns his camera toward Peter. Many of the stories in the gospels are just about Peter and Jesus. The rest of the disciples are role players at most. This story is no exception. How does Peter respond?

HOW PETER RESPONDS (vv 28-33)

1. Step of faith (vv 28-29) [Read vv 28-29.]

This is so instructive for us as followers of Jesus. All Peter needed was Jesus' command. He didn't ask for proof that he could do it. Really all he asked for was the assurance that this figure on the sea was truly Jesus. All he wanted was to be sure Jesus was going to be there with him in this moment. "If it's you, tell me to come."

In a moment Peter will look for something more. When he sees the waves, he begins to look around for proof. He starts to doubt he can do it. Strange, because he already was doing it! What more proof could he get? It's an interesting illustration of the relationship between proof and faith. There is no proof great enough to erase all need for faith.

Friends, is it enough for you that Jesus is God, that He can walk on the water that threatens to drown you, that He is there in the storm with you? Or are you looking around for proof? If you base your hope on proof, sooner or later you will sink. Instead, why not follow Peter's example here? All he needed was to be sure Jesus was going to be there with him. "If it is you, Jesus, tell me to come."

2. Cry for help (vv 30-31) [Read vv 30-31.]

Peter steps out in faith but gets distracted by the wind and cries out to Jesus for help. Jesus grabs him, but He has a gentle rebuke for his dear friend. Jesus uses a fascinating word in v 31: "Why did you doubt?" The word literally means to be of two minds at once or, in this case, to try to go two directions at once. Simply put, it means to waver between two options. Peter was trying to walk to Jesus and keep his proximity to the safety of the ship. He got distracted by the waves and lost his single focus on Jesus. Doubt is not so much an intellectual struggle, like when we don't know the answers and we need to figure out an intellectual problem. Doubt is an issue of focus. It's the inability to keep your mind and heart focused solely on Jesus.

Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter for looking at reality. The waves and wind were real. So are the circumstances of our lives. Poverty, cancer, joblessness, death, loss—these are all real. But Jesus calls us to look beyond what is real to a new reality where He makes it possible to walk on water, to feed 5,000 people with one lunch, and to deliver millions of sinners from God's wrath through one awesome act of self-sacrifice.

3. Heart of worship (vv 32-33) [Read vv 32-33.]

This is the first time the disciples worship Jesus. The magi worshipped Him (2:11), a leper bowed before Him (8:2), and a synagogue ruler knelt (9:18); but the disciples haven't done any of these things. Now they respond, "Truly you are the son of God." They are starting to understand. The feeding of the 5,000, the walking on the water, rescuing Peter, and quieting the wind – these have finally convinced the disciples who He is.

When Jesus snatched Peter from the waves, the disciples saw more than an illustration of Jesus' power to rescue. The miracle became a window for them to His true identity. He is the Prophet like Moses. He is God. And He is the one who never fails even those who fail Him.

Friends, it's the same for us. Jesus is calling us to narrow our focus to one single point: Him. The real world around us has a million attention-grabbing concerns: our health, our money, our security. Jesus calls us to look away from all of these to see nothing but Him. And when that happens, we'll do what the disciples did: we'll worship Him. Worship is

what happens in the heart that truly sees Jesus for who He is. It always begins with a cry for help. It ends when we find ourselves doing the impossible, not because we worked up the skill to walk on water, but simply because Jesus is there and He bid us come.

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