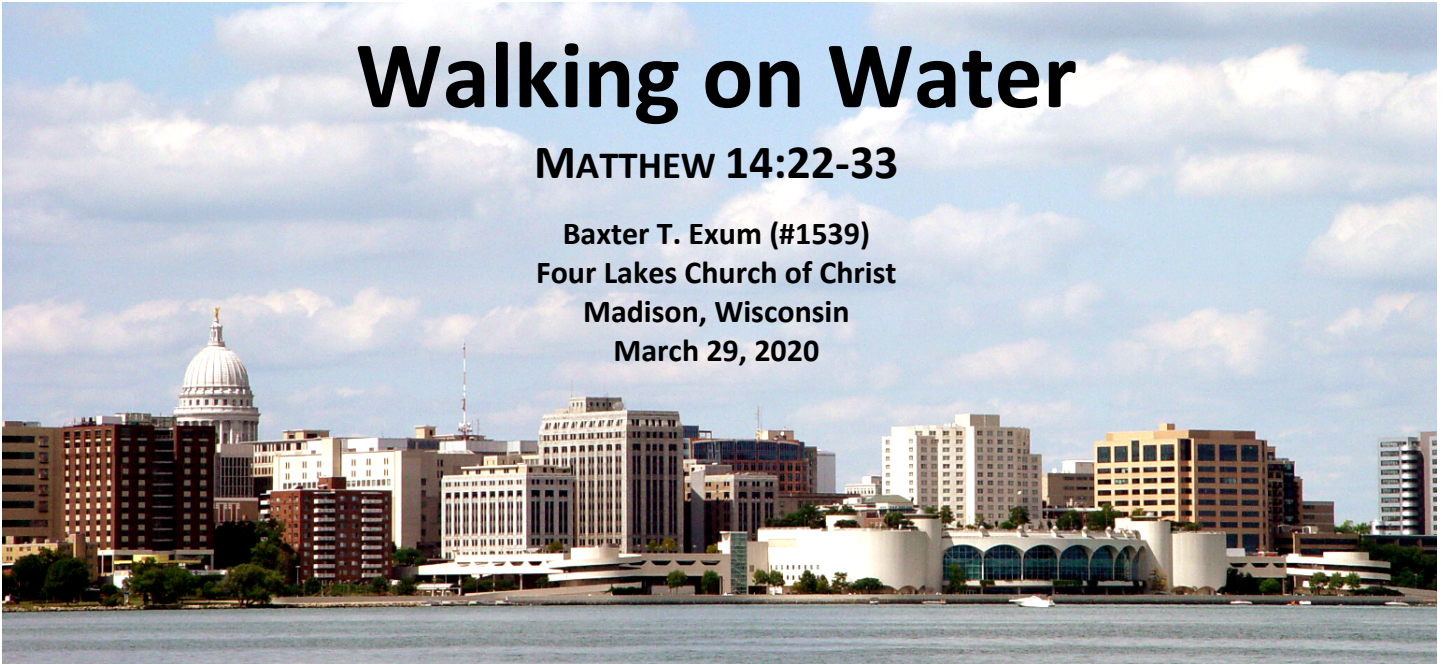


Walking on Water

MATTHEW 14:22-33

**Baxter T. Exum (#1539)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
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****COVID-19 LIVESTREAM****

It is good to be with you this morning! As we begin, I have put our contact information on the screen, along with a summary of God's plan of salvation. God, of course, made the first move in sending Jesus to this earth to live a perfectly sinless life. He died on the cross for us, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. In response, we hear his word (Romans 10:17), we believe him (Mark 16:16), we repent of sins, that is, we have a change of heart and we turn away from sin (Acts 2:38), we confess, we publicly acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 8:37), we allow ourselves to be buried with him in baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 22:16), and then we live the Christian life (Galatians 2:20). I've also included a summary of what we need to do if we ever fall away, if we ever turn aside from the narrow path. Basically, we repent and pray. We see this in the command to Simon in Acts 8:22 and in the reminder from James in James 5:16.

If we can help with any of this, we would encourage you to get in touch with us right away. Most of you have the contact information for the shepherds of the congregation on the front of the bulletin each week or in your church directory, but I'm putting the church's contact information on the screen, and we would encourage you to get in touch if there is any way that we can help. If you'd like to study, get in touch. If you have a question of some kind, get in touch. If you've fallen away and need to return, get in touch. If you need to be baptized immediately, get in touch, and we would be more than happy to meet and to help in any way that we can.

As I mentioned last week, our purpose in these livestreams is not to have a complete worship service. I don't plan on taking the Lord's Supper on camera, and I certainly don't plan on singing to you this morning. But our purpose here is to share a study. I realize there are many options out there online, I hope you are taking advantage of some of those. But there's also a huge value to us coming together as a Four Lakes family in this way. This is us! As most of you know, we also get together every Wednesday evening at 7. This week (on Wednesday, April 1), we hope to study the longest chapter in the entire Bible, Psalm 119, and between now and then I'm asking that we prepare by doing three things:

1. Read it in one sitting (this should take around 15 minutes)
2. Notice the unique structure (notice how it is arranged)
3. Underline or circle all references to the Word of God (law, statutes, precepts, decrees, commands, word, etc.) – I think you might be shocked at what you find.

So, I'm hoping we can come prepared this Wednesday at 7 to study a rather unique Psalm in the book of Psalms.

This morning, though, we plan on studying a passage from the New Testament, a scene from the life of Jesus. If you have a Harmony of the Gospels, you might want to use it this morning. It's an account that's found in Matthew, Mark, and John, but we'll be looking at Matthew's account, because Matthew includes something pretty significant that Mark and John leave out. I'm referring to the account of Jesus walking on water during a storm on the Sea of Galilee.

The passage we'll be looking at today is Matthew 14:22-33, but it's also found in Mark 6 and John 6. I'm putting a picture of the Sea of Galilee up here. I'll swap this out with the text in just a bit, but then I'll bring it back as we move along, because there is a value to seeing the actual body of water where this happens.

To put this in some kind of perspective, the Sea of Galilee is a bit larger than Lake Mendota and a bit smaller than Lake Winnebago here in Wisconsin. It is roughly 8 miles across (from east to west) and 13 miles long (from north to south). And the Jordan River basically flows through it, a bit like the Yahara River here in Madison. The Jordan comes in at the north and exits to the south. As you can perhaps just barely see on the screen, the Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills or mountains. Here in Wisconsin, most of us would say that these are "mountains," but if you are from Colorado or Washington State (or some other place with actual mountains), you would probably describe these as "hills." So, this is where this event takes place.

Let's start with the text, and then we'll make some observations as we apply it to our situation today. Again, we are looking at Matthew 14:22-33. In chronological order, this comes right after the feeding of the 5,000. The crowds are so impressed, they come in and try to make Jesus king by force. Jesus, then, is in the process of escaping. His mission is not to be a king, at least in a literal sense. And that's where we pick up in Matthew 14:22. I hope you can follow along in your own Bibles, but for those who aren't able to do that, we do have it on the screen – Matthew 14:22-33.

22 Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. 23 After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. 24 But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. 26 When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." 28 Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." 29 And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. 33 And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!"

As we look at this passage, I want to make a series of observations, starting with the fact...

I. ...that JESUS SEEMS TO ALLOW THE APOSTLES TO EXPERIENCE A TEST OF THEIR FAITH HERE; IN FACT, HE SEEMS TO DIRECT THEM INTO IT.

This is not a random meeting, but instead (in verse 22), when it is evening, Jesus *“makes”* them get into the boat, and he *“makes”* them go ahead of him to the other side. He *“compels”* them, as some translations have it. This is not something they volunteer for, but this is something Jesus forces them to do. Jesus goes up on the mountain to pray. We then fast-forward to some point between 3-6 a.m., the disciples are in the middle of the sea, a long distance from land, they are struggling, straining at the oars, and they notice a figure walking on the sea, as if he were about to pass by (as Mark’s account tells us). And that’s interesting to me: Jesus doesn’t walk to them, but it’s almost as if he is out for a stroll on the stormy lake, but he’s close enough to be seen. And it’s terrifying. Notice: The apostles first assume that this figure is a ghost of some kind. And this reminds us that the northeast shore of Galilee (where they are heading) is weird. Strange things happen up there. They are heading to where the demon possessed man named Legion is from. Off the top of my head, I can’t think of any places around here that people consider to be “haunted.” We had a few places like that in Northern Illinois, some places that were a bit spooky. And this place they are rowing to had that kind of reputation. Plus, things are a bit scarier at 3 a.m. than they are at 3 p.m.! So, they see a figure, and they assume it’s a ghost. They are also stuck. There’s no getting away from this. They’ve tried, but they aren’t moving. Plus, they’re tired. Plus, they are in a violent storm and surrounded by waves. Everything seems to be working against them here.

And again, this is not an accident, but instead, Jesus sends them into this. And as we see it unfold, we find that what is going on here is basically a test of faith. It is a challenge. It’s something Jesus has apparently been praying about, perhaps all night long, as he often does before big events.

And only when they’re terrified, Jesus calls out and says, *“Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid!”* And he is now walking toward them on the water! So again, it seems to me that Jesus does this to test and to even strengthen their faith. And so, he doesn’t go with them, but he sends them on ahead and waits until they are in a tough spot. And then, when they are terrified, Jesus shows up, and ultimately, Jesus has a solution to their problem. He’s reinforcing the idea that he is with them, even when they don’t see it, even when they don’t realize it. You might realize this is actually the second storm on Galilee. The first is in Matthew 8 when Jesus is asleep in the bottom of the boat. But this time, Jesus is not with them on the boat. He does, though, know what they are going through. I think about that song we sometimes sing, *“Jesus knows all about our struggles. He will guide ‘till the day is done. There’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus, no not one....”*

What Jesus does here reinforces this. This is a teachable moment. This is a moment when faith gets stronger. And we have this recorded for us here as a reminder: When life gets weird, when storms come up, when we are struggling with the oars (so to speak), we have this passage reminding us that Jesus knows what we are going through. And so, as we face the storms of life, as we face trouble at work, as we face trouble at home, as we face disease or illness, as we face getting stuck at home for weeks on end – he understands.

And so the first lesson here is: Jesus allows the disciples to face this difficult situation as something of a test of faith, as a way to strengthen their faith. And this leads us to what comes next, as Peter apparently gets the message loud and clear. If what the Lord does here is intended to test and strengthen faith, Peter gets it...

II. **...and so the next observation is that PETER ACTUALLY DEMONSTRATES HIS FAITH IN JESUS BY STEPPING OUT OF THE BOAT (verses 28-29).**

Jesus, then, puts them to the test, and Peter passes the test! Most of us either understand or at least can imagine that it takes quite a bit of faith to step out of a boat and into a stormy sea! Sometimes it takes quite a bit of faith to step into any body of water! It goes against our nature. It's just wrong to step from safety into danger. I think back to taking our kids to the MSCR swim classes when they were little. Sometimes we went to West, sometimes to Memorial, and here they are, 3-4 years old, we as parents are in the water and need to convince them that it's okay to jump in. They don't want to jump in! It's dangerous out there! And so the instructors had a bit of a trick. They called it "chop, chop, timber." They'd have the kids pretend to be trees, we as parents would "chop" each of their ankles, and then they were supposed to fall into the water as we backed away. Sometimes it would actually work! Chop, chop, timber! But sometimes we had to do a little more persuading. We knew it was for their own good if they could learn how to swim, but they needed some convincing. They needed to understand that it would be okay. They needed to trust us out there in the pool. And in some sense, this is what Peter is facing. Was Peter in danger here? Was Peter in danger of drowning? Absolutely not! Peter was the safest human being on the face of the earth at this point!

And I find this interesting: Stepping overboard is obviously Peter's idea, but notice: He first gets permission from Jesus. In verse 28, Peter says to Jesus, **"Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."** Jesus responds and says, **"Come!"** Peter gets out, he walks on the water and he comes toward Jesus.

We'll get to him sinking in just a moment. And I know, it's easy to criticize Peter for sinking, but as we look at verses 28-29, let's not miss the fact that Peter had the faith and courage to do what eleven others were NOT willing to do! It's easy to come away from this looking down on Peter at least a bit, however, Peter does something amazing here. He's not 4 years old standing on the edge of a pool, is he? Several of these men, including Peter himself, had been commercial fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, and all of them but Peter had no plans for getting out. They are a long distance from land, the boat is being battered by the waves, the wind is contrary, they are straining at the oars, and John's account tells us that **"a strong wind was blowing."** By far, the safest place to be is in the boat, but Peter sees Jesus, he gets permission, and he steps out (obediently) onto the water. He's obedient, because once Jesus gives the command, Peter is now obligated, making this an act of faith, an act of obedience.

This is important to us, because whenever God gives a command, he also gives us the ability. He never commands the impossible. And what is true for Peter is also true for us. When God gives a command, the safest and best course is to believe and obey, to step out in faith. And it might be difficult. We might need to forgive somebody. We might need to love an enemy. We might need to help a neighbor. We might need to be the first ones to make a move toward reconciling with somebody. We might need to love our own families, even though we are locked together in the same house all week. I don't know what you're facing, but the point is: Although it might be difficult, obedience is always best. Peter sets the bar pretty high for us. He believes, and he obeys. He demonstrates his faith.

III. **This leads us to another observation (in verse 30) as we find that PETER NOW GETS DISTRACTED AND HE STARTS TO SINK.**

In my first draft of the PowerPoint, I said that Peter gets distracted and sinks. But he doesn't really sink, does he? He **"starts"** to sink. And there is a difference. He doesn't drop like a rock to the bottom of the Sea of Galilee, but he **"starts to sink."** In my mind, he starts losing traction in the water! He's in the process of going down. And that is not good in the middle of the sea in a storm, but it's not instant doom. And this seems to reflect what is going on in Peter's mind. He's distracted. We don't see it in verse 30, but if we look ahead to verse 31, we see something in Jesus' rebuke. He says to Peter, **"You of little faith, why did you doubt."** He doesn't condemn him for sinking, but he condemns him for doubting. As I understand it, the word **"doubt"** here goes back to a word referring to "double." It's the idea of your mind going back and forth. So, he starts out well, looking at Jesus, but then he sees the wind. He's looking at Jesus, but he sees the waves. He's distracted. He looks at Jesus, but then he gets distracted by his circumstances. He starts looking at the trouble he's in. And that's when he starts to sink.

Maybe we could imagine a 12"x12" beam out in our yard somewhere. Most of us could get up on that and we could walk it. We could walk on that beam. But imagine that beam now spanning the width of the capitol dome here in Madison, and now we're looking at a beam that's maybe 70 or 80 feet off the ground. Now we have a problem, don't we? It's the same beam, but now we are distracted. Now we start thinking about what might happen if we fall. Unless our lives depended on it, most of us wouldn't be willing (or even able) to take that risk. We start looking down, we start focusing everything that might go wrong.

The same thing sometimes happens in terms of faith. Haven't we seen people in the Bible get distracted to the point of disobeying God. We think of the ten spies sent in by Moses to spy out the land. They could do this! God is on their side! And yet as they started looking around in the Promised Land, they got distracted. Instead of looking at God, they started noticing how big everybody is and how impossible it would be to conquer the land. And we know how that ended: Forty years of wandering in the wilderness!

And like those ten spies, we might also face the same temptation. In his word, God tells us to do something, and we start thinking of all the reasons why we can't, "I can't serve in this way; I'm not qualified," or, "I can't be immersed in water for the forgiveness of my sins; I would be condemning my family who've now died without doing this," or, "I can't share with my neighbor; I only have 79 mega rolls left in my closet," or whatever. When we take our eyes off Jesus, we get distracted, and that's when we get in trouble. That's when we start to sink. That's when we become like the **"double minded man"** who James warns us about, **"...for that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord,"** James says. Like Peter, our temptation is also to look back and forth between Jesus and our trouble and to very briefly wonder whether God really knows what is best for us, and so we hesitate, and we start to sink. Ideally, though, we **"run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith"** (Hebrews 12:2).

Instead of doubting Jesus, Peter should have doubted the wind and waves. I have a friend who used to be an atheist, and one of his favorite sayings is that we need to "doubt our doubts." Instead of doubting God, let's be doubting the doubts we have about God. And he has demonstrated that in his own life. We look to God, and we do not focus on everything around us that might go wrong if we obey.

Thankfully, instead of sinking, instead of turning back to the boat, Peter calls out to Jesus, **"Lord, save me!"** This is one of the most simple and unpretentious prayers in all of Scripture. And this leads us to what comes next...

IV. As we come near the end of this passage, let's notice something else (in verses 31-32), the reminder we have here that **JESUS SAVES, DESPITE HUMAN WEAKNESS.**

In fact, the Lord saves BECAUSE OF human weakness! Even though Peter takes his eyes off Jesus, Jesus never takes his eyes off Peter! And when Peter fails, when he calls out for help, Jesus is very quick to forgive, he's very quick to save. A number of years after this happens, the apostle Peter writes a very interesting verse in 2 Peter 2:9, where he says that, ***"The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."*** Peter knows this from personal experience. As Christians, if we go to God in prayer, forgiveness is quick. Matthew says that Jesus ***"immediately"*** stretches out his hand. Later in life, Peter writes another interesting verse in one of his books. He quotes from Psalm 34, and he says (in 1 Peter 3:12), ***"For the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer."*** Peter knows this from personal experience. So, a big idea here is: Jesus saves!

Conclusion:

As we come to the last verse, let's notice the result of everything that happens here. The result is: Peter and the other apostles worship Jesus as being the Son of God. I mentioned earlier how this is the second big boat incident. The last time Jesus calmed the sea, the apostles reacted with a question (in Mark 4:41), ***"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"*** Last time, they were asking. Now, they are declaring. Now, they know who this is. He is the son of God. ***"Son of God,"*** of course, is a title referring to deity. Later, in fact, Jesus is accused of blasphemy for describing himself in this way. And so, when the disciples describe Jesus as the Son of God, they worship Jesus for who he truly is.

We now have the advantage of learning from this account. And this morning, we've learned how important it is to step out in faith, we've learned what to do when we fall, we've learned that Jesus saves, and we've been reminded that Jesus is the Son of God.

I'm thankful you've been able to join us this morning. I'll look forward to being with you again this Wednesday at 7, if the Lord wills. Let's close today with a prayer.

Our Father in Heaven,

We praise you this morning as the Almighty Eternal God that you are, the God of creation and God of all comfort.

We are thankful that you continue to supply our needs, even beyond what we need, but in a way that allows us to share with others. We pray that if any one of us has a need of some kind that we wouldn't be too ashamed to ask for help.

We continue to pray for a cure and for a quick end to the pandemic we're facing. We pray that through whatever happens next that we will learn to trust you more, just as the apostles did. We pray that we would have the faith of Peter. We pray that we would have the courage to step out in faith, risking everything.

We pray for opportunities to demonstrate our faith this week. We pray for the courage and wisdom to always to what is right and what is truly needed.

We pray that you would bless our congregation. Even though we are separate, we pray that you would keep us close through the relationship we have with each other through your Son.

We come to you together this morning, looking forward to the time we can once again assemble in one place as your people.

In Jesus we pray, AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com