

The Courage to Walk on Water
 The Rev. Amy Spagna
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 Matthew 14:22-33

The story of Jesus walking on water is a familiar one, so much so that I would guess nearly everyone in this room could re-tell it if asked. It's also made it into modern popular culture. The phrase "that person walks on water!" has come to describe someone who seems superhuman – because we all know liquid water isn't nearly firm enough to walk on – or who can do no wrong. We might even say they're a little bit like Jesus in that regard. The actual story behind the figure of speech is an old one. Perhaps it was actually told as the coda to the Feeding of the 5000 miracle we heard last week before either story was recorded by Matthew, John, or their sources. It's not just about how Jesus performs an unrepeatable pair of miracles. Matthew carefully frames it so readers will connect Jesus with the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. There, God spends quite a bit of time moving over the water, and not only at the very beginning when God created the world. For example, Psalm 77 says of God, "Your way was in the sea, and your paths in the great waters*/ yet your footsteps were not seen" (Ps 77:19, BCP) and Job 9 notes that "[God] alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8, NRSVue).¹

For Jesus to have done the very same thing shouldn't be all that surprising. It's also not the first time he does something amazing which leads to one or more of the disciples wondering out loud who he really is. Matthew doesn't tell us how either he, or they, actually react to this proclamation that he is truly the Son of God. It's not as

¹ William Loader, "First Thoughts on Passages from Matthew in the Lectionary: Pentecost 11." <https://billloader.com/MtPentecost11Ord19.html> [accessed August 3, 2026].

important in this moment as the fact that Jesus is present with Peter and the rest in their fears of the dark and the stormy night, and of his own ghostly figure gliding across the wavetops toward their battered boat.

People in the ancient world did not like the water. The wine-dark sea that Homer describes fame was a place of great fear. As Homer, and, many centuries later, the Roman poet Vergil, would describe in their epic poems about the Trojan War and its aftermath, the sea was a very dangerous place. It was mysterious in ways that land was not. It was also home to monsters like Scylla and Charybdis. Storms seemed to come up out of nowhere, and very often wrecked both ships and sailors. The ancient Israelites didn't like the sea much, either. They collectively remembered the story of the Flood, where 40 days of nonstop rain wiped out most of the world. Like the Greeks, they also told stories about the fantastical and monstrous creatures that lived in the sea, such as the dragon-like Leviathan which only God could control and which the Psalmist says God had made for the sport of it.

Given all these stories, and the sense of existential dread stemming from them, it's little wonder that most people – likely many of the disciples included, despite how they were fishermen by trade - the sea just wasn't a place they'd want to be if they could avoid it. Which is one of the reasons why it's remarkable that we find them out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee all night, drifting away from the safety of the shoreline as a storm batters their boat. Matthew's original audience probably did not expect a good outcome... but, if they've been following the story closely, they should not have been very surprised when Jesus walks out over the turbulent water to pull them out of trouble. It's the latest in a long series of miraculous events where Jesus acts out of compassion

for the people around him. The lesson in all of them is that God is faithful, even when people lack faith, and will act when people find themselves caught in less-than-ideal circumstances.

Peter kind of misses that point. Given what we've learned about him, it isn't a huge surprise when he has a kind of comic, Wile E. Coyote-like moment after he jumps out of the boat. He's not exactly chasing the Road Runner off the edge of a cliff. But, like Wile E. Coyote, Peter gets momentarily distracted when he notices that he's no longer on firm ground and that the wind has come up. It's at that point when Peter panics and holds up an "uh oh!" sign. Fortunately Jesus is there to counteract gravity. He reaches out, steadies Peter, and says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt 14:31, NRSV)

Peter's fear is not just understandable from the perspective of being able to empathize with him. Fear plays a major role in this story. All of the disciples are scared out of their minds, whether it's because of this predawn storm that's threatening to wreck their boat, or because they see the ghostly figure of Jesus walking across the wavetops, or because he rescues Peter. The fear is a test: Jesus is testing the disciples, and then Peter tries to turn the tables and test Jesus: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (Mt 14:28, NRSV). One commentary on this text suggests it's as if he is saying, "If you really are who you say you are, '... show me how I can not only pass this test but earn extra credit by walking on the water with you.' Everyone reading this already knows the outcome: Peter sinks. And in his sinking, he learns the lesson the test was designed to teach. The lesson is not 'Try harder.' The lesson is not 'Keep your

eyes on Jesus,’ as though faith were primarily a matter of improved focus. The lesson is three words... ‘Lord, save me.’”²

“Lord, save me.” (*Swson me.*) This isn’t an ask. It’s a demand, either for the past or for the future. Yep, it’s weird to us as modern English speakers, though ancient Greek actually has imperatives in the present, past, and future tenses. The one Matthew uses here could be either a variant of past or future, so it’s open to interpretation. As in, it while it’s not so much, “save me right now,” it could be more along the lines of, “save me like, yesterday!” or, “save me in a few minutes!” and without using the word *please*.

It takes courage for Peter to make this demand in the first place. On the one hand, the imperative in the Greek doesn’t leave room for questioning whether someone will comply or not. On the other, Peter doesn’t show quite the same kind of courage that leads Wile E. Coyote to keep chasing the Road Runner despite how he always fails to catch him. Peter’s kind of courage is rooted in trust. While it’s not totally clear how much he trusts Jesus in this moment, he has at least enough to demand help. However, Jesus’ response to him suggests that maybe Peter could do a little better in that department. It’s not just about how Jesus literally saves Peter from drowning in this moment; rather it’s more about the long term project of saving humanity from its tendency to live on the pathway of sin and death. Trusting Jesus enough to do THAT is ultimately what enables Peter, and us as his spiritual descendants, to live into what they have learned about who Jesus is. He is truly the Son of God, and, as his very name suggests, he is one who saves.

² Zina Jacque, “Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33.”

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19/commentary-on-matthew-1422-33-7> [accessed August 3, 2026].