

Walking on the Word of Jesus

Only one person not named Jesus the Son of God has ever walked on water. In that respect, Peter had a totally unique experience in the history of the world. He got to stand on H₂O, a feat that just has never worked before or after. But this was no magical water in the sea of Galilee. I tested it and my feet sunk right in. The only way I could stay atop the water was in the boat. While I was riding in the boat on the Sea of Galilee, I could not hold the tears back as I was sailing on the water where Jesus and Peter took their famous steps. While the “walking on water” part of the experience was totally unique to Peter and Jesus on that day, Peter was experiencing a cycle in his relationship with Jesus that is so common to us all. I’m willing to bet you’re in one of the stages of that cycle at this very moment.

Task and Separation

So what does this cycle look like and how does it begin? Jesus gives a **task** and some degree of **separation** to complete it. **“Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd” (Matt. 14:23 NIV 11)**. Jesus had just finished feeding the five thousand on the hillside and now he was overdue for the alone time that he had gone out to the hillside to find. So he sent them on their way with a task and went up the mountainside to pray. This **task** and the following **separation** turns out to be the perfect opportunity for the teacher to test his students as he sends them off on their own.

Storm and Stress

Then comes the next stage of the cycle—storm and stress. Matthew tells us, **“Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it” (Matt. 14:24)**. The Gospel of Mark gives us an extra little detail **“Jesus saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them” (Mark 6:45-52)**. The mountains on the side of the Sea of Galilee are kind of like looking out on Lake Winnebago from the top of High Cliff State Park. You can see a long way, and the steep banks make for pop up storms, dicey winds, and choppy waters. So the disciples, many of whom are experienced fisherman, are stuck straining against the wind and waves and the boat is being blown all over the place.

Wave after wave, and relentless, endless, exhausting wind leaves them sitting out in the middle of the lake only halfway there during the 4th watch of night, between 3-6 am. They’re tired as can be, they’re frustrated by the nuisance of the waves and that’s when the real stressor comes. The disciples catch sight of some sort of phantom coming out to them on the lake and they cry out in fear! **“It’s a ghost!” (Matthew 14:25)**. Now sure it’s easy to think, “You silly guys, why didn’t you know it was Jesus. Who else would it be?” But remember the disciples had seen a crazy thing or two. It wasn’t that long ago that they had witnessed Jesus cast a legion of demons out of a man into a herd of 2000 pigs that rushed down a cliff and drown in the very sea they were sailing on. So one ghost certainly isn’t out of the realm of possibility, and this ghost has their exhausted legs shaking in their boots in the boat. 😊 They’re smack dab in the middle of **storm and stress**.

Is this the stage in which you find yourself right now? Battered by wave after wave on the relentlessly windy sea of year 2020. You’re well aware of the barrage—a global crisis, national unrest, endless bad news and the stress of figuring out how to sail through it all. But let’s not forget that before the dam broke loose on all that stuff, you were already up to your neck in the daily spiritual battle against a powerful enemy named Satan that would love nothing more than to drown you forever in doubt, worry, and anger at God.

Now, put it all together and the ship has sailed on your patience. Frustration is crashing in from every side. And every next wave is the stressor that threatens to sink you in in sinful doubt and worry! The only thing more exhausting than actually being in the boat through it all is the realization that the

year is only a little over half way done. Are you there in the boat dealing with storm and stress? If so then, it's time to move to the next critical stage in the cycle.

Reassurance

In the midst of sheer terror on the restless sea comes the voice of Jesus. **“Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid” (Matt. 14:27)**. Not a ghost! It's Jesus walking on water out to them. If anyone else was speaking, those words would be mostly useless, like telling a child who is afraid of the dark to simply not be afraid of the dark! But those three words in the middle, **“It is I,”** make the whole statement the most powerful and comforting reassurance. “It is I,” means the all-powerful, present everywhere Son of God is with them. The disciples weren't out on the boat alone, facing the storm and the wind alone, even if they thought they were. The one who had once before calmed the raging storm with the words of his mouth was now standing on the sea before them.

And so, catching sight of the one who says “It is I” is real powerful reason not to be afraid. And the truth is, even before they knew he was there, Jesus had his eyes on them the whole time, whether he was watching from the mountain side or watching in his power as the LORD. As the Psalmist says, **“The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry” (Psalm 24:15)**.

Dear Christian, when you find yourself in storm and stress, you have the same reassurance. Jesus has promised to be there with you on the stormy sea speaking peace in his name. His eyes are on you and his ears are attentive to your fears and cries and prayers. That fact equips you with life-changing power.

Look at what it did for fretting Peter. Peter asks, **“Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water” (Matt. 14:28)**. In the moment, he asks for something otherwise totally irrational, to walk on choppy seas, but Jesus had just told him to have courage. And so, Jesus grants his request! **“Come,”** he says. All in one word, he gives his permission, his promise, and his assurance that this will work for Peter to do.

Now it's time for a Peter to take a true leap of faith, trusting in the command Jesus has given him. As C.S. Lewis says, “This moment contains all moments” (*The Great Divorce*). **“Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.” (Matt. 14:29)** At no time before or after this in the history of the world has this ever worked, but because Jesus gave Peter the command, it worked. Peter walked on the water out to Jesus. And understand this! It wasn't just water he was walking on, because water just won't hold anybody up. Peter was **walking on the word of Jesus!** He was standing on the word and promise and power of Jesus the one who holds the wind and seas in his hands.

In every storm, that's the powerful assurance and reassurance that you have in each and every word of Jesus. When Jesus gives the word for a man to walk on the water of a sea, it holds a man up on the water. When Jesus combines his Word with water in baptism for the forgiveness of sins, it forgives sins. It washes away every trace of spite, worry, doubt, rage, and anger at God and brings the blessings of life, certainty, and salvation in Jesus. The promise made to you by Jesus through water and the word at your baptism is a promise you can walk on in the middle of every storm that assails your soul. You stand as children of the promise because you know that the word of God spoken by the Son of God will not fail.

Wavering

Pastor, aren't you forgetting that it wasn't long before Peter started wavering and began to sink? Did Jesus' promise fail? Let's take a look at that verse, because it's important to know who and what begins to waver. **“But when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and [began] to sink” (Matt. 14:30)**. When Peter took his eyes off Jesus and started getting overwhelmed by all the turbulence around him, that's when Peter's walk on the water “petered out”. That's when his faith in Jesus' word, not the

word itself, faltered. Though it was just moments ago when Peter had displayed incredible faith and trust, now he wavered and was sinking fast.

Do you find yourself in those moments in the cycle—one moment walking on water and the next moment drowning beneath the waves? One-day walking on the word of Jesus and the next day thrashing in doubt and wavering in worry. If you find yourself in those moments and days, pay close attention to Peter’s desperate cry for help. It’s the only left to do. **“Beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”** (Matt. 14:30).

Rescue

“Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.” (Matt 14:31). He does not leave Peter to sink in the depths below! Instead, he is quick to save and reaches down to rescue. On the days our trust in his words and promises threatens to peter out, we cry out, “Lord, save us!” And he is quick at hand to save. He again sends his unwavering word to still our restless hearts and to steady our sinking faith.

Even his gentle word of rebuke to Peter, **“You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt 14:31)** simply reminds us of that fact that we have no reason to doubt. For he is with us, and his word is sure enough to walk on until we reach him at last.

Worship

Maybe you feel like you’ve been stuck in one of these troughs of storm and stress and wavering for the last few months. Maybe this cycle of storm, stress, reassurance, wavering, and rescue seems to repeat by the day or even the hour. Me too! I’m right there with you. That’s part of the reality of being a sinner-saint. But notice what this whole encounter on the restless sea leads to—worship. **“When they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”** (Matthew 14:32-33). This endless cycle in our lives of stress and reassurance, of wavering and rescue, leads to endless reasons to bow down in the middle of the boat worship over and over again. We have a God who controls even the wind and waves for our good. We have a Savior whose word we can trust firmly enough to walk on. These encounters lead our hearts to worship. “Who is like our God? He controls the wind and waves, but most of all, he’s the God who saves!” Lord, save us! Amen.