

Bible Study Appendix

Walking on the Water Matthew 14:22–33 by The Reverend Frances Taylor Gench

The story of Jesus' walking on the water was one of the first Bible studies the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church engaged as we began a journey together amidst the storms that rage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The text conveys significant affirmations about the identity of Jesus to and for the church. Disciples and the church in this world clearly face storms and conflicts, and attendant fears that the forces and powers around us are too strong and will undo us. But Matthew affirms that the believing community continues to experience the power of Christ's presence, both as judgment upon fear and insufficient trust ["You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:31b)], and as grace that responds to fear and doubt—there is the saving hand and the assurance that Christ will not let the disciple sink.¹ Fear is a central reality in this text. We are challenged by it to consider the fears that cripple our own lives of discipleship and that of our community of faith—"to set those fears in the context of Jesus' power which he exercises on our behalf and offers to those who believe in him," and to risk stepping out on the water, taking steps toward greater faith and obedience.²

Dramatic reading

Begin with a dramatic reading of Matt. 14:22–33. Assign roles for a narrator, Jesus, and Peter. Have the rest of the group read collectively the lines of the other disciples (including nonverbal responses and sound effects).

Questions for discussion and reflection

- First impressions: what strikes you most as you hear this story? The text is 2,000 years old, from another time and place. What is familiar about the experience reflected in the story? What is strange? What connections and gaps between the text's world and ours do you discern?
- A good storyteller will draw attention to important matters by way of repetition. What are some of the repeated words or concepts in this story, which underline their emphasis? Make a list.

Repeated language that might be noted:

—the language of fear is a major thread in the story (vv. 26, 27, 30)

—"immediately" (vv. 22, 27, 31)—note its connection with Jesus' response to need

—"wind" (vv. 24, 30, 32)

—“boat” (vv. 22, 24, 29, 32)—a symbol of the church in early Christian art

—two instances of walking on the water

—the verb “to be,” connected with Jesus’ identity—“It is I” . . . “if it is you” . . .
“Truly you *are*”; (vv. 27, 28, 33)

- An unusual Greek word (*basanizō*) appears in v. 24 to describe the action of the waves upon the boat. In the NRSV translation, the boat is “*battered* by the waves”; the NIV describes it as “*buffeted* by the waves.” However, the word could also convey that the boat is being “*harassed*,” “*tormented*,” or “*tortured*” by the waves. What do you make of this odd description?
- The church to which the Gospel of Matthew was addressed was struggling mightily with both external and internal conflicts. Externally, Matthew’s largely Jewish-Christian congregation was engaged in vigorous conflict with the synagogue as it navigated a painful transitional process of separation and self-differentiation (Matt. 23). Internally, it wrestled with church discipline and forgiveness (Matt. 18), false teachers and prophets (Matt. 7:15–20; 24:11, 24), people with authority problems (Matt. 23:8–10), and love growing cold (Matt. 24:12). How does this historical setting illumine your reading of the story? What storms and conflicts does your community of faith face at present?
- The evangelist Matthew was not the first to tell this story. Matthew received it from Mark (the earliest Gospel) and retold it to his own community in a way that would address its concerns. In pairs, compare Matthew’s and Mark’s versions of this story (handout attached for this exercise). Are there any differences between the two? What significant editorial changes do you observe in Matthew’s rendition? After completing this exercise in pairs, compare notes with the whole group on the editorial fingerprints noted.

Differences that might be noted:

—Verses 28-31 of Matthew are not present in Mark (Peter’s walking on the water). Matthew weaves into the story a word of judgment and grace for the church.³ Moreover, in Matthew, the story is no longer about what Jesus alone can do. Christ shares his power and authority with his disciples and with the church.⁴

—Matthew’s rewriting emphasizes the separation between Jesus and the disciples.

—Matthew radically alters the ending of the story in v. 33.

—Matthew adds emphases on “little faith” and “doubt.”

—In Mark, Jesus “intended to pass them by” (Mark 6:48)! A major emphasis of Matthew’s Gospel, however, is that Jesus is “God with us” (1:23; 18:20; 28:20).

- How do you imagine the tone of Jesus’ voice in his response to Peter in v. 31: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”
- A great deal of Old Testament background music is in this text. What Old Testament echoes do you hear and what do they convey? What do they contribute to a reading of the story? (study Bibles will be of assistance).

Old Testament echoes that might be noted:

—“It is I” in v. 27 can be translated literally as “I AM” (*egō eimi* in Greek)—an echo of Exod. 3:14. What does this suggest about the identity of Jesus?

—References to God walking on the sea may be noted (e.g., Job 9:8; Hab. 3:15; Ps. 77:19; Isa. 43:16). What does this suggest about the identity of Jesus?

—“Lord, save me!” is the language of the Psalms, the language of prayer (e.g., Ps. 69).

—Old Testament stories of storms being stilled (e.g., Jonah, Ps. 89:9–10, Job 26)

—Old Testament references to the sea as the abode of chaos (e.g., Gen 1:1–10 and 7:11; Ps. 18, 69, 107).

- There are important connections between this scene and two other scenes in Matthew’s Gospel. Compare this story in Matt. 14:22–33 with the stories that appear in 8:23–27 and 28:16–20. What connections do you observe?

—Where are you in this story? With whom do you most identify? Why?

—What connections do you discern between this story and our lives?

—What do you learn from this story about the nature of discipleship and the life of the church?

—What do you learn from this story about Jesus?

—Consider this quotation from New Testament storyteller Tom Boomershine, and share your responses to it:

This story addresses the primal fears that cripple us as human beings and as followers of Jesus. These are fears of the power of chaos in its many and varied forms, from the uncontrollable powers of nature to the irrational forces that suddenly rise from the depths of

our personal and communal lives. Symbolized as storms, wind and ghosts, these unknown forces of chaos blow through our lives. And the fear of these powers often leads us into weak resignation, cowardice, and withdrawal. This story is an experience of testing those powers, discerning who is truly in control, and taking the first steps toward true discipleship. It sets those fears in the context of Jesus' power, which he both exercises on our behalf and offers to those who believe in him.⁵

- Boomershine asks this question of groups exploring the story: “In what way are you now experiencing fears of the unknown or are doing something you have never done before and are afraid you will lose it?”⁶
- Where do you and/or your community of faith find yourself challenged to take risks—to get out of the boat and onto the water, taking steps toward greater faith and obedience?
- What new insights have emerged from your engagement with this text and your discussion with each other?

Handout

Walking on the Water (NRSV)

Matthew 14:22–33

²² Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Mark 6:45–52

⁴⁵ Immediately [Jesus] made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

⁴⁷ When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.

⁴⁸ When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. ⁴⁹ But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ⁵¹ Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *The Gospels*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 87.

² Thomas E. Boomershine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), p. 93.

³ Craddock, p. 84.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 328.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Boomershine, p. 103.