

Sermon – August 13, 2023  
“Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 14:22-33

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words and making them a blessing for your people that ignites our continuing transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning! Welcome to the Global Methodist Church! Yes, the application to become part of the GMC has been processed and approved! The GMC logo is now on our bulletins and will begin to show up more and more as we continue to connect with the GMC. Anyone feel different this morning? Our connection to other congregations has radically changed, and we are now moving forward into a new and growing denomination.

Sometime during my upbringing in West Virginia, I heard the scripture of Jesus walking on the water and it was not long until I was at the pool and decided to give walking on water a try. I will share that every time I tried walking on water I ended up under the water. I can also recall one time as a teenager when some friends and I had gone to the lake to water ski and I was to push the boat off from the launch point and I waited too long to move to the boat. I thought, no problem, I will just step into the water, and I promptly disappeared under the water as it was very deep. My ability to walk on water had not changed at all. Now, I am certain many of us are like Peter and jump out of the boat when Jesus calls and go to him on the water. But for those of us who may tend

to stay in the boat, let's look together at this morning's scripture and see how walking on water might apply in our lives.

Let's start with a little background to help put our reading in its first century context. There are three references that those in the boat, the disciples, would be familiar with from Old Testament scriptures. The first is Job 9:8, where the writer, speaking of God, states, it is God "who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea." God is one who moves on the seas. Next is Psalm 77:19, where the psalmist writes about God, "Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen." We begin to get the idea that those familiar with the scriptures would have an image of God walking in or on the sea. Finally, we find in Isaiah 43:16 these words about God: "Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters." A devout Jew who had studied the Old Testament would recognize one who walked on the water as someone related to God. We should recall that just prior to our reading this morning, Jesus has fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. With these items as background, lets move into today's scripture reading.

There are two words in our scripture reading that are repeated three times: "immediately" and "wind." After a little is multiplied and all are fed, Jesus immediately sends the disciples on ahead to the other side. They are sent by themselves and into a wind that is not favorable for travel to the opposite shore. The wind is most likely coming out of the east, the direction they need to travel, and it is strong enough that they will struggle to make progress toward the distant shore. Jesus will stay behind to dismiss the crowds and then go and pray alone. Matthew does not give us clarity about why Jesus sends the disciples away with such urgency and into a difficult time on the water. There is some indication, more so in John's Gospel, that there may be a political struggle that has occurred at the feeding of the 5000. John notes for us that the men are seated in groups of fifty, a military concept for Israel. One explanation for Jesus sending the disciples away is that these men have come to make him a military king, and Jesus needs to separate his disciples from them and then dismiss the crowd and their ideas of kingship for him. Matthew does not align the separation with political reasons, but leaves the reason as a need for Jesus to be alone in prayer with the Father. Either way Jesus does not become a military messiah to immediately lead Israel in battle against Rome, but after the feeding of the 5000 and a time of prayer alone, Jesus does move towards Jerusalem to become our king in keeping with the Father's will. Whatever the reason for the hasty separation for the disciples, Jesus does separate from the crowd and spends most of the night alone

in prayer to his Father. Jesus prays until the fourth watch, the hours before dawn, while the disciples have struggled against the wind out on the lake. As Jesus leaves the time of prayer and seeks out the disciples, they, after nine hours of struggling against the wind, are said to be far from shore. A literal reading of the Greek would be miles from shore.

After praying alone, Jesus heads to where the disciples are on the water, walking on the water. The Sea of Galilee does not have sandbars and jetties that one can walk on. It is described as a lake that deepens rapidly as one moves away from the shore. Contrary to what many doubters suggest, there is no shallow water for Jesus to find to walk miles out into the lake that can explain how Jesus is able to walk on the water. Jesus is filled with the Spirit and moves on the water in a supernatural manner. The time of day Jesus heads towards the disciples is the fourth watch, the hours before dawn, so there may be some light that allows the disciples to see him coming to them across the water in spite of the wind and waves. When they see Jesus, they decide he is a ghost or a spirit without a body, and they are terrified by this idea and cry out that they are seeing a ghost. It was a common belief among the first century fishermen that those who drowned could be seen as spirits, and when they see Jesus walking towards them in a place no man could walk, they assume a spirit is coming to them. They know the lake is deep and no person could walk on the water and conclude they are being visited by a supernatural occurrence.

Across the water comes a familiar voice, telling them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."<sup>i</sup> Jesus calls to them across the water with the "I am" of the burning bush. Jesus' words are to comfort them and to help them recognize who it is walking towards them on the water. Peter, the responsive, emerging leader of the disciples, responds to Jesus' words with a request. Peter asks Jesus, if it is Jesus, that he command Peter to come out on the water to meet him. Peter's request is a bold statement of faith. If this is Jesus and if Jesus commands Peter to get out of the boat and walk on the water, then Peter trusts that he, like Jesus, will be able to walk on water, water Peter knows will not support his weight, water Peter has put his feet on many times and every time ended up in the water or standing on the bottom. And across the water above the sound of the wind and waves, Peter hears the voice of Jesus respond with a single word, "Come!" Jesus' response is not, "Okay, if you like, come out on the water," it is a command, "Come!" It is a command to leave behind the safety of the boat, step onto water that will not support Peter, and walk on it to Jesus. It is a command that requires faith that Jesus' power will extend to Peter on the water, and he too will walk on the water. It is a command to step out in faith.

It is at this point in my engagement with this text that I started to wonder if I were Peter, would I get out of the boat? I wonder, if I heard Jesus command me to do what I knew to be supernatural, would I obey? And as I started thinking about my response, I started thinking back over my life, looking for times when I was willing to obey Jesus and step out in faith in a manner that required Jesus' power to sustain me. It is a good question for each of us. Have we heard Jesus' call or command to us across the water to come and we got out of our comfortable place, in full faith, trusted Jesus, followed his command to come, and in coming, did some impossible thing? I thought about this for a while and considered several events in my life. One that came to mind was on a calm September morning when my flight instructor, after several takeoffs and landings, told me to stop and let him out and take the plane solo through a takeoff and landing. And I assure you, after dropping him off and taxiing back to the start of the runway and then pushing the throttle forward and releasing the brakes, that there was a moment when I wondered if I would be able to land the plane. And just so you know, when you are in a training plane all by yourself without the weight of another person, that little plane comes off the runway very quickly. You are committed to landing the plane before you have time to think much about what you have done. But as I thought about the comparison of Jesus' call to Peter and my own example, I began to realize that I had been trained to take off and land. I knew the capabilities of the plane. I knew what was required to guide the plane and bring it back to the point of landing. Peter had no training for walking on water. He and Jesus had not spent time practicing water walking together. Instead, Peter was being asked to trust Jesus' command to get out of the boat and enter the realm of the supernatural, the realm of water walkers, the realm of God. Peter had seen Jesus heal. Peter had witnessed Jesus feed the thousands. Peter had heard Jesus' command to come to him on the water. Peter had to have enough faith to get up, step onto the water, and go to Jesus.

We don't know how old Peter was at this point in his life, but we think he is a more mature man. He owns a business and he is married. How many times had Peter stood up in a boat during a night of fishing and stepped over the side and gone into the water? We don't know, but we do know that every time before when Peter had stepped out of the boat, he transitioned from one in the boat to one swimming in the water or walking on the bottom. Yet Peter gets up, steps over the side of the boat, puts his foot on the water, then the next foot on the water, and starts walking towards Jesus. Peter has faith in Jesus and gets up, gets out of the boat, stands on the water, and starts walking to Jesus. Peter doesn't look back and tell the others, "Hey, look at me. I am walking on water." No,

Peter starts walking on the water towards Jesus in the midst of the wind and waves. He is walking on water that will not support his weight. Peter heads out, leaving behind the safety of the boat to move towards Jesus on the water.

We are not told how far Peter walks, just that he does and at some point in his walk, Peter notices the wind. Peter's focus moves from Jesus and faith in Jesus to sustain him on the water, to the wind that rages around them, and when it does, Peter becomes frightened and he begins to sink. Peter is a fisherman. He has been on the sea all of his life. Peter knows well what it means to be separated from your boat in heavy winds. It is a lesson every sailor, and I am sure every power boater, knows too well. If you go over the side and the wind is blowing at all, you will never catch your boat. Peter is sinking. He is in great danger, and he does what we all should do when we are in great need. He cries out to Jesus, "Lord save me!"<sup>ii</sup> And immediately a hand, the hand of Jesus, reaches out to where Peter is and catches him. Before Peter sinks beneath the water, water that has ceased to hold him up, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches Peter. Even out on the water when Peter's faith has failed, he is not beyond the reach of Jesus. Don't miss the word "immediately" that is in Jesus' response. Peter cries out and immediately he is caught by Jesus. Jesus' words to Peter are "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Don't hear this as a rebuke. Hear it as Jesus confirming Peter's faith and encouraging him not to doubt. Jesus has told Peter he had enough faith to get out of the boat and walk on water. Why did Peter let fear bring doubt? Jesus has Peter in his grasp. Jesus is there with him. Jesus has come across the water to help those who struggle in the wind that is against them. Jesus has told us he is always with us. Why do we doubt? Why does our faith falter in our times of need? Peter is a man of faith. Jesus' command was not, "Peter, come," but "come," an open invitation for all to get out of the boat and in faith come to Jesus on the water. Peter had faith to get out of the boat and walk on the water. Peter's faith may have faltered, and our faith might falter as well, but Jesus is still with us, waiting to answer our cry and reach out and catch us. Jesus has Peter in his reach even if his faith is overcome by the wind and waves. Jesus has us in his reach as well. We who are in Christ have heard him call to us across the water to come. Will we step out onto the water, the place of faith in action, and go to Jesus, trusting him with our lives? Why do we doubt? As Jesus has Peter always in his grasp, so Jesus has us always as well. Why do we doubt? Where are we so challenged by the world's obstacles that we lose sight of Jesus and focus on the winds of the world instead? When we are distracted by the winds of the world, we also need to cry out to Jesus and ask him to catch us and lift us up.

Jesus does not say anything else to Peter about what happened on the water. He helps Peter get back into the boat and when they are in, the wind ceases. Those in the boat realize that Jesus has come to them on the water, and they worship him, calling him, for the first time in Matthew's Gospel, the Son of God. They make a connection between Jesus walking on the water and God coming on the water to His people. They have begun to realize that Jesus is not just another prophet but the Son of God and they worship him, giving that which is reserved for God to Jesus. The disciples do not yet understand the king Jesus will become and the cross he will endure to set them free from sin and death. That is yet to come into their understanding, but now they begin to worship Jesus as the Son of God.

Now a boat in the scriptures is often understood to be the church, the body of Christ at work in Jesus' mission to all people. We are to seek to be in the boat, striving to follow Jesus' command to love God and to love our neighbor. Later in Matthew's Gospel, we will find the Great Commission. It is in Chapter 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." We who follow Jesus are to be about our commissioning, working as the church. We are not to be waiting around to see what Jesus is doing, but are to immediately get into the church as a believer and start working with other disciples to be the church. The wind is the response of the world to the church. The world seeks to keep the church from fulfilling our commission of making disciples of all nations. The wind is against us, and we need Jesus in our boat, but we are to be at work until Jesus arrives.

The boat is a safe place, yet Jesus calls to us across the churning waters out in the challenges of the world over the sound of the strong wind. When we see Jesus coming close, we are to have faith to get out of the boat and go to Jesus when he commands us to come and join him in the places where only he can sustain us. Of the disciples in the boat that night on the water, only Peter knows that Jesus will catch him if his faith falters. Peter knows this because only Peter got out of the boat. We are to have faith to respond and get out of the walls of the church building and go with Jesus into the turmoil of the world, trusting that Jesus will be with us and will catch us if we begin to sink. And when we are outside of the boat walking in the places where we can only walk in the strength of Jesus, when we become frightened and our little faith falters, we are to be ready to cry out to Jesus and let him reach out his hand and catch us.

We should ask ourselves, “Have we ever stepped out of the boat and gone to Jesus on the water?” Do we have faith to get out of the boat? What might getting out of the boat look like in our lives? Have we ever prayed for someone to be healed? Have we ever let Holy Spirit lead us to people who are in need and asked them to let us pray for them? Have we ever acted in love towards another person we have been led to by Holy Spirit? Have we shared the love of Jesus with a person Holy Spirit has led us to?” We should ask ourselves where we as a church are in stepping out in faith to meet the needs in our community, trusting Jesus to provide all of the provisions that such a response will require. Likewise, we should ask ourselves if we as individuals are working in places where we have to rely fully on Jesus or we will not succeed. Where are we stepping out in faith in a manner that unless Holy Spirit shows up, we will sink into the waters and be lost? Where are we so exposed that if our faith fails, our only option is to cry out to Jesus and trust him to reach out his hand and catch us? Our tendency in life and as a church is to see a need, plan, budget, collect funds, pray, and act in places where we are not at risk or have little at risk. There is nothing bad about those actions unless they keep us from answering Jesus’ call to come. Jesus’ call to us is always from across the wind-stirred waters to come to him in full trust. Jesus calls to us across the water to come, and we are to ignore the wind, step out of our boat, the comfortable, cushioned pews of the church building, and go to Jesus where he is waiting in the turmoil of the world. The hand Jesus may be using to reach out and save someone who has cried out to Jesus for salvation might be our hand. We have to be with Jesus in the world in order to reach out and catch someone who is sinking in the turmoil of the world who has just cried out for Jesus’ help. We have to get out of the boat to be with Jesus.

*Pray with me: Lord of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, call us to come to you out on the water in the midst of the winds of the world. Jesus, help us have faith to risk all we are, all we have, and all we seek to hold to respond to your call to come to you and join you on the water in the midst of the wind. Holy Spirit, give us courage and strength to step out of the boat even in little faith and enter into the mission of Jesus to all people, right here, right now. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> NRSV Matthew 14:27

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV Matthew 14:30