

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **Truly You Are the Son of God!**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 14:22-33

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In our journey through the Gospel of Matthew we come today to another of those amazing miracles which are so well-known to Bible students and even children—Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. Sometimes these stories are so well known that familiarity can breed contempt; we may even yawn when we hear about them. But these were real events with profound truth behind them. May God help us to have ears to hear what He wants to teach us.

Let's stand as we read Matthew 14:22-33:

*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.*

*During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.*

*But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

*"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."*

*"Come," he said.*

*Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"*

*Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"*

*And 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."*

This miracle, like the Feeding of the 5,000, seems to be designed to generate faith in Jesus' disciples, but it goes a step beyond the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. The key, I think, is found in verse 33, where following this miracle it says, "Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, 'Truly you are the son of God.'" This is the first time to my knowledge that the Twelve disciples unequivocally acknowledge this about Jesus. The Father had affirmed Jesus as His Son at His baptism in 3:17, and the demons at Gadara addressed Him as the Son of God in 8:29, but the disciples themselves had not come to this level of understanding until this point. Oh, they knew they were dealing with someone unique. They knew He could do amazing things and say amazing things. But now they finally conclude that He is, indeed, the Son of God.

What is it about this particular miracle that brought them to this conclusion? I suppose in one

sense it may have been just the weight of the evidence. It kept piling up and piling up, and this miracle may have pushed them over the top. But perhaps there was something about this incident itself that generated a level of understanding and faith in the disciples that nothing else had up to this point.

**Jesus follows the feeding of the 5,000 with another incredible miracle. (Matthew 14:22-27)**

As is clear from verse 22 immediately after the Feeding of the 5,000 Jesus made the disciples get into their boat and head toward Capernaum, presumably to find some peace and privacy, while He stayed to dismiss the crowd. I probably should have done this last week, but it's not too late to get some value from a satellite photo of the Sea of Galilee, also called Lake Tiberias after the Emperor, or Lake Gennesaret or Lake Kinnereth because of its shape like a harp. (The Hebrew word for harp or lyre is *kinnor*). The lake is 13 miles by 8 miles.

Capernaum, which was Jesus' Galilean headquarters, was located at the north end of the lake. Bethsaida, where the feeding of the 5,000 took place was just to the southeast. The disciples could have easily walked there, but they were fishermen and preferred a boat ride to walking whenever possible. (The feeding of the 4,000 took place further south on the east shore). When Jesus sent the disciples back to Capernaum, they were merely retracing their route of a few miles.

Once the disciples set sail and the crowd dispersed, Jesus goes up on a mountainside to pray, alone.

**He first spends time alone in prayer.** This is as normal as eating and sleeping in Jesus' life. Again and again He finds the time to get alone with His heavenly Father. There has always been something a little mysterious to me about this. Of all the people on the face of the earth, one would think that Jesus had the least need for concentrated times of prayer. After all, He was the incarnate son of God; He was perfect; He always did the Father's will; He loved deeply and reached out to the needy constantly. Why did He need to pray so much?

Maybe we should reverse the logic here. Perhaps the reason He always did the Father's will, and loved so deeply, and reached out to the needy was that He was so faithful in prayer. Certainly we would be justified in concluding that if Jesus felt the need to be alone in prayer as much as He did, how much more should we feel the same need.

But there's another potential explanation of this prayer phenomenon in Jesus' life. Prayer is not principally a way to solicit what we want from God; it is how God and His children communicate with one another. Because Jesus was so committed to staying in fellowship with His Father, He could not help but talk with Him regularly. We get a few glimpses into what they talked about, like Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17, but only a few. I suspect that much of their conversation was just about enjoying one another's company. What do people who are in love talk about? Well, whatever interests them. They talk about the past, the present, the future. They talk about dreams and goals and common interests. I wonder if Jesus and His Father didn't also talk about such things. And that's OK for us, too, in our own prayer lives. I'm

convinced we need to learn to make prayer less formal and more conversational, less about using the right words and more about relating rightly to One we love.

**Jesus “sees” when His disciples are in trouble.** In verse 24 we learn that “the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.” Actually that is an understatement! Verse 25 indicates it is now the fourth watch of the night—3 am to 6 am. Since Jesus sent them off before dark, six to nine hours has passed and they are still trying to get to Capernaum, which is only a few miles from where they started. John’s Gospel confirms they had traveled only 3 to 3 ½ miles in the hours since they left! Furthermore, they don’t know where Jesus is! During a similar storm in Matthew 8 Jesus had been asleep in their boat. They had awakened Him and He “rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.” But now He is miles away! Obviously when you put all these facts together, you can see that the disciples are in deep trouble.

Mark’s Gospel adds a very interesting detail. In 6:48 Mark says that while Jesus was praying on the mountain, “He *saw* the disciples straining at the oars.” Is it possible the boat was visible because of Jesus’ elevation on the mountain and the fact that they had only traveled a few miles? I suppose the boat might have been visible as a speck out on the Lake, but I doubt if Jesus could see the disciples straining at the oars. After all, it is very stormy, indicating the probability of clouds and rain. I suspect Mark is really hinting to us that Jesus “sees” the boat (and the disciples) through His supernatural power and presence.

Please understand that we cannot go anywhere that Jesus does not see us. Proverbs 15:3 states, “The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.” You know the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm with its powerful promises about God’s presence.

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*

Similar promises are made by Christ, such as, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

But why, if Jesus “sees” them and knows their terror, does He not rush away from His prayer retreat and rescue them immediately? Because He is never in a hurry. And because He’s doing the more important thing right now—praying. And so He waits. He waited, too, after Lazarus had died; in fact, He waited several days until the body had decayed before arriving in Bethany to raise him from the dead. Remember what He said to His disciples on that occasion: “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe” (John 11:14-15). Sometimes God allows us to reach the extremity of our need before intervening in order to build our faith.

But eventually Jesus does intervene. Matthew tells us simply, “during the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.”

**He walks across the water and offers Himself as antidote to their fear.** The disciples are already frightened by the storm but become nearly apoplectic when they see Jesus walking on the water. They think they are seeing a ghost. The Greek word is *phantasma*, from which we get our English word “phantom.” It literally means “a creature of the imagination.” You’d be surprised how many liberal commentators agree with the disciples’ initial conclusion that Jesus is just a figment of their imagination. They only thought they saw Jesus walking across the water as their tired and frightened minds played tricks on them. Some suggest He was actually walking along the shore, but because of the mist He appeared to be walking on the water. It’s really odd when someone finds it easier to believe that all Twelve of the disciples simultaneously saw an apparition rather than to believe that Matthew is sharing a true story.

Jesus not only appears to them but he also speaks to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” He uses the emphatic first person pronoun which God used when revealing Himself in Exodus 3:4: “I am who I am.” Its use on the lips of Jesus may have overtones of deity, according to Greek scholar, Leon Morris.<sup>i</sup>

**Jesus allows a disciple to stretch his faith, and then rescues him when he fails.** (28-31)

The story of Peter and his ill-fated attempt to walk on water is found only in Matthew. Neither Mark nor John mention it, though both of those Gospels include the story of Jesus walking on the water. Matthew apparently had a certain fascination with Peter because he told several stories about him that are not found elsewhere.

**Peter exhibits both impulsiveness and faith.** It is our tendency to denigrate Peter for his frequent impulsiveness. We wonder at his motives for wanting to walk on water and think that perhaps he got what he deserved when he nearly drowned. But I would suggest to you that it is also possible, and I think preferable, to look at this incident through much more sympathetic eyes. Peter was impulsive, of course, but I think he was also sincere. To me this is actually an amazing faith initiative on his part—getting out of the boat in the middle of a raging storm without benefit of a life preserver or a snorkel or a wetsuit! Perhaps Peter felt it was safer to be with Jesus on the water than to be without Him in the boat.

And I want you to notice that Peter asks permission before he does it: “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Not only that, but permission is granted. “Come,” Jesus said. Jesus would never have invited, much less commanded, anyone to do anything sinful. When Jesus says, “Come,” then, and only then, does Peter get out of the boat. Whatever else you want to say about Peter, he’s the only mortal human being I know of who ever walked on water! Of course, that’s not the end of the story.

**Peter begins to sink when he focuses on the wind and waves.** When he “saw the wind” (verse 30; I think it means that he saw the effects of the wind, like the huge waves), he became frightened and began to sink. The implications are almost too obvious to mention. Whenever we get our eyes off the Lord and onto the raging storms around us—financial storms, relationship storms, political storms, terrorism storms, or just storm storms—we too are

susceptible to fear, a sense of hopelessness, anger—all of which make us susceptible to that sinking feeling.

Peter knew, however, what to do when facing almost certain death.

**He offers the most profound prayer possible.** It is also one of the shortest prayers you'll find anywhere. "Lord, save me!" That's what you call a bullet prayer—no excess baggage, no explanations, no arguments or rationalizations—just "Lord, save me!" It's not very different from the sinner's prayer, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner," which is a prayer that everyone of us needs to pray in some form at some time in our lives. But Peter is already saved in the sense of knowing Jesus as Savior—his is not a prayer for spiritual salvation so much as it is a prayer for physical rescue. And I think this same prayer is one we can and should pray whenever we face a crisis that creates a sense of hopelessness: "Lord, save me!"

Immediately Jesus reaches out His hand and catches Peter. In fact, Jesus does two things here: He not only rescues Peter; He also challenges him.

**Jesus rescues him but also challenges him.** He says, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?" Peter had faith enough to get out of the boat, but he didn't have faith enough to keep his eyes on Jesus. He began to doubt. Now doubt is a complex thing. I preached a message here on Easter Sunday a few years ago entitled, "In Praise of Doubt." Doubt can be a good thing. It can keep us from being gullible. It can protect us from false doctrine. It can cause us to demand good reasons for believing something instead of flimsy ones.

But doubt can be harmful as well. When God has provided us good, solid reasons for believing and we still doubt, that is not healthy. Now I'll be honest with you—I feel totally inadequate to criticize Peter. I am a fairly adventuresome person by nature, but I don't think I would have gotten out of that boat, and once I got out I know I would have had second thoughts about what I'd done. I've been really scared only a few times in my life, and each time it was because I did exactly what Peter did—I got my eyes off Jesus and onto my circumstances.

I remember being in a Yanomao village in 1996 in southern Venezuela—a three-hour plane ride across the rainforest from the nearest airport, then a half-day's walk through thick jungle—and trying to sleep in a hammock with a witch doctor chanting for the demons to come and get the two white guys. I didn't sleep one wink all night for probably the first and only time in my life. I doubted my own sanity. I was afraid.

Jesus' rebuke of Peter's doubting was based upon the fact that He had made Himself and His power *so clear* to Peter that doubt was no longer legitimate. I think He has done the same to most of us if we'll be honest about it.

We come, then, to the crux of the story:

**Jesus convinces His disciples that He is the Son of God. (32-36)**

**He exhibits divine power over nature.** Verse 32 tells us that “When they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.” And John adds that “immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.” I see the likelihood of three separate miracles here: First, Jesus is walking on the water, demonstrating His power over gravity. Second, He demonstrates His power over storms. Apparently the wind stops just as He enters the boat. And third, the disciples reach their destination without any further effort or time passing. I don’t want to push these statements beyond what was intended by the author, but there is no doubt that Jesus is being portrayed as One who has power over nature.

It is at this point that Mark adds another most interesting observation: In his parallel account in Mark 6:52 he says: “They were greatly astonished, for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.” (NASB) Imagine it! They saw with their own eyes as Jesus fed perhaps 15 to 20 thousand people out of one little boy's sack lunch and they gained no insight from it. The fact is they probably had the twelve basketfuls of food left over from the miracle actually in the boat with them, but still they gained no insight—not even enough to keep them from nearly dying of heart failure just a few hours later when the very same Jesus walks across the lake on top of the water to save them from drowning!

But once again, as I did last week, I must ask us to look inside our own hearts to see how often we too have failed to gain insight from God's activity in our lives. How often has He answered prayer in some amazing way but still, when the next crisis comes we persist in worrying or trying to solve it by our own human ingenuity instead of turning it over to the One who has always proved Himself to be totally faithful and totally adequate! *We are such slow learners.*

But thankfully that’s not the end of the story. While their amazement indicates the disciples had gained no insight from the earlier miracle, Matthew tells us that something happened to break through their hardened hearts. I want to go back to the question I asked at the beginning of the sermon: was there something unique about this miracle that got through to the disciples and enabled them to see that Jesus is the Son of God? I suspect the answer is yes, and it may have been that . . .

**This miracle is just “for them.”** Jesus has been healing people, casting out demons, feeding the multitudes miraculously, but the disciples were mostly spectators to these miracles. They saw these miracles with their own eyes, so I don’t mean to imply it was hearsay, but these miracles were done for others. But when Jesus walks on water, saves Peter, and calms the storm, it’s just for them. No one else sees it. There’s no other purpose than to build their faith.

When we know in our hearts that God has done something just for us, then that’s a special faith-builder. We become convinced at a whole new level. In a very small way our family experienced that over the past two weeks. Our older son Eddie works for Macy’s North in Minneapolis. He has been on a very positive career path and had reason to believe he would get another promotion in just a few months. Then Macy’s suddenly closed down 3 of their seven divisional offices, and all 950 employees in Minneapolis were told their jobs were being eliminated by the first of May.

When he first called us Eddie was scared, somewhat angry, feeling vulnerable for his four kids, and wondering where he would be able to replace his job. We empathized and listened, but of course we told him God was well aware of the situation and was able not only to replace the job but give him an even better one. I suspect those words sounded a bit hollow to Eddie given the pending circumstances.

Then two days later he had a major God-sighting. The company told him they were going to give him nine months of severance to find a new job, plus Cobra even beyond that. There was no legal obligation for the company to do that. He had worked for them for less than four years. It was a God-thing. Suddenly the phone calls from Eddie changed, the attitude changed, the sense of hopelessness was replaced by confidence. He knew all along intellectually that God was able; now it was personal.

Likewise in the boat the hard hearts of the disciples are softened, their eyes are opened. They are taken past amazement to worship.

**They worship Him and affirm His deity.** Verse 33: “Then those who were in the boat (i.e. the Twelve Disciples) worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” I suppose they might have said, “We’ve been inclined to think so for some time. We’ve seen evidence. But now we know it for a fact.”

And friends, please don’t overlook the fact that Jesus also accepts their worship. Consider this syllogism:

Worship is for God alone;  
 Jesus accepts their worship;  
 therefore, Jesus acknowledges that He is God.

**Conclusion:** We’ve talked about the unique contribution this miracle makes to the disciples’ understanding of who Jesus really is—the Son of God.

But what unique contribution does God want this story to make in your life? If you have never put your faith and trust in Christ, I think I can answer that question easily—God would have you bow your knee and simply say, “Lord, save me!” You need to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and your own Savior.

For those who are already His children through faith in Christ, I think what this miracle story is designed to do is to stretch our faith and keep us from doubting. The next time we face a crisis—personal, financial, relationship, legal, or spiritual—He wants us to say to ourselves, Jesus is 100% aware, 100% capable, 100% caring, 100% faithful, so I really don’t need to go through the normal cycle of shock, grief, anger, hopelessness, etc., that I always seem to go through. That’s a choice I make. I can just as well choose to say, “Jesus is truly the Son of God, He’s my Savior, and He’s my friend, and I’m going to trust Him with this situation.”

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i. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 382.