

Bible commentary Week 14

Matthew 14:22–33

Prelude

Chapter 14 opens with the arrest and execution of John by Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, son of Herod the Great. Hearing of John's death, Jesus withdraws by boat to a deserted place by himself. His hope for solitude is dashed when a crowd follows him and brings their sick to be healed. What follows is the account of the multitude fed with five loaves and two fish.



Believers should not be “of little faith” but should trust God’s power to overcome whatever threatens them.

—Ken Gibble, writer, teacher, and retired Church of the Brethren pastor, Greencastle, Pennsylvania.

1. Psalm 69:2.
2. Fred Craddock et al., *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year A: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*, (Trinity Press International, 1992), p. 400; George Matheson, “Make Me a Captive, Lord,” (1890).
3. Mark 6:45–52; John 6:16–21.

A walk on water

When the people are fed, Jesus, still seeking solitude and possibly concerned about the implications of John’s execution, immediately orders the disciples to take their boat to the other side of the lake. Then he dismisses the crowds. Alone at last, he goes up the mountain to pray.

The scene then shifts to the boat where huge waves have placed the disciples in jeopardy. When they see a figure walking on the water toward them, they are terribly frightened, supposing it to be a ghost. Jesus reassures them by identifying himself and saying the words that we hear so many times in the scriptures: “Do not be afraid.” When Peter tries walking on the water, he loses his nerve (his faith?) and has to be rescued by his master. They both get into the boat, the wind dies down, and the disciples declare, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

The first readers of Matthew’s Gospel were of Jewish background. They knew from their scriptures that the sea represented chaos and destruction. The flood waters of the Noah story and the cry of the Psalmist, “I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me,”¹ were familiar to them. To be on board a boat in a violent storm would have been a terrifying experience, literally and symbolically.

Reading this account, members of the early church would have noted that when the disciples are in the boat without Jesus, they have virtually no hope of survival. When Jesus appears, Peter leaps into action. Peter’s initial boldness may have reminded the first believers of their own resolve when they committed themselves to begin their faith walk. But waves of doubt and fear have appeared, they see threatening forces around them, and they have begun to “sink in life’s alarms,” in the words of one nineteenth-century hymn writer.²

Both Mark and John have similar accounts of Jesus walking on the water. In Mark the disciples are “utterly astounded” by the event and fail to understand its meaning. John does not tell us what the disciples thought. By contrast, Matthew assures his readers that the power of God, embodied in Jesus, gives the Son of God control over the waters of chaos.

Reflect

1. Peter stepped out of the boat and suddenly felt afraid. Are you surprised that his faith did not sustain him even though he was willing to step out of the boat at Jesus’ invitation?
2. Think of times when you have cried out, “Lord, save me.”
3. In what tone of voice do you imagine Jesus saying, “Take heart it is I, do not be afraid,” and “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”
4. How would you explain the miracle of walking on water to children or youth?