

Congregational Church of La Jolla, UCC
Rev. Tim Seery
August 9, 2026

Matthew 14: 22-33

Let's pray: Gracious God Who Calms All Storms: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week Jesus was tired. His soul ached. Think about what that feels like—think about a time when your soul ached, when it felt like the grip of this world's injustice was too much to bear, when life felt unfair, when one of your beloveds was confronted with something that was wholly unfair—a diagnosis, a premature end of life, a significant setback. This is what's happened to Jesus. His mentor, his teacher, his cousin, John, has been murdered by an empire that is blood thirsty and vengeful—by a ruler who cares nothing about public service and cares every bit about personal enrichment. And Jesus knows this is the fate of prophets so he goes away. He goes away to find a moment of solitude. To be with himself. We heard the story. He goes away but the people follow him. They follow him because they too were hungry, they too were hurting, their souls ached just as profoundly—and what Jesus did was not send them away, not give them empty promises, no, he fed them. He took an impossibly small amount and made it into something abundant. Not by a magic trick or some sort of unexplainable thing, he took the bread and he broke it and blessed it and looked at every one of them in their hopeful but tired eyes and gave them the bread of life. He saw them. He saw their pain, he felt their lament, he knew their hopes and their fears—they too lived with him in this awful time, subjects of this horrible man who was in charge, and they got to experience the physical embodiment of their Creator giving them bread. The feeding of the 5,000. A beautiful story. Well where we are at today actually just picks up right where we left off. We get to see what happened right after. This beautiful story about feeding hungry people, making something out of nothing, making a way where there was no way has just gone down and so what do you think happens next. If this was a choose your own adventure story what would you choose. Personally, if I was making the editorial choices in the Bible I'd be curious about the clean up—like how did these 5,000 people exit to go home. I was thinking about this the other day actually, I'm on this new thing where I try to get at least 15,000 steps a day and because I live in Little Italy that route of 15,000 steps takes me all the way past the Convention Center to the Rady Shell. And I told you last week that the Rady Shell comfortably holds about 5,000 people—so with Jesus having just fed 5,000 people in this remote place that would be like the entirety of a packed Rady Shell all following Jesus to this remote place but anyone who has ever attended a concert or event like that knows it's the exit from the venue that is treacherous—that's where the real adventure starts. And so if I get so unlucky as to be passing the Rady Shell when a concert is getting out, it's the best motivation ever, because it makes me high tail it out there as fast as I can as a sea of people start filing out and filling the street. And that made me think of how did everyone disperse at the feeding of the 5,000. Of course no one was out there trying to call and uber or whatever people do now, but that had to have been an anxiety ridden sight to see 5,000 people who have just been feed by the Savior of the World, who have just seen and touched the embodiment of their Creator to disperse from this gathering. That's where my mind goes.

But alas, we don't get much information about that. What we are told is that Jesus got his disciples into a boat so they could proceed to the other side of Lake Gennesaret so that he could handle the disbursement of the crowd. We don't know what that looked like but we know that after it was over he went up the hillside to be alone and to pray. Which it's about time. Jesus this entire time has been seeking a moment of solitude, which has not come, and so he had to physically engineer it to happen. He had to get the disciples out of there, he had to get the crowd to disperse, and now finally he can care for himself. And who knows how much time he got. Don't you wonder though what he was saying, or thinking, or doing in that moment of solitude. There's something so profound about that. I said this last week—that the embodiment of God on Earth needed rest. And needed self care. Because we all love to think we are the

exception to that—that we can do it—our culture teaches us this, that we we’ve got it covered and it all can rest on our shoulders alone. And it’s like, no. No. God needed rest too. And so do each one of us. But as Jesus is in this moment of solitude, which he has been desperately grasping for, another crisis unfolds. As it does. The boat that the disciples boarded to traverse Lake Gennesaret is in challenging waters, they’ve hit some turbulence out there on the sea, and they are afraid. And it must have really been bad because these guys were not strangers to seafaring—several of them had careers in the fishing industry—but they are afraid and Jesus knows this and Jesus is walking toward them on the water. And while you’d think this would be so comforting of an image—I remember my home church growing up had a painting of this—of this stormy sea, in deep blue hues and Jesus just walking above it all—but this was not the charming image one might think. This further terrified the disciples. Here they are in a bind, terrified, and now there’s a ghost coming toward them. But Jesus says, “take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” And even that didn’t really land well, Peter says well, if it really is you, and you’re walking on water, then tell me to get out of the boat and come toward you. Jesus beckons Peter toward him and Peter gets out of the boat, and it must have been ok for a time but he got afraid and started to falter, started to sink. And Jesus reaches his hand out to catch him and they all eventually get into the boat together and the wind dies down. And they finally all recognize Jesus.

So that’s the story.

What do we do with it? Where do we go with that?

On the surface you can see all sorts of things to glean from this—Jesus reaching out to catch a terrified Peter, Jesus coming toward them, cutting through all of the tumult and turbulence, Jesus being called out of solitude to go help his friends. Jesus carving out space and time for restoration after having just fed 5,000 people. There’s a lot here. But if we peel back the surface just a bit what else can we see.

The first thing to get out of the way is that academic, cerebral folks like us can sometimes get a bit itchy about the entire business of walking on water. Myself included. And there’s some out there who will simply just say that we need to suspend all reason. To have faith. To trust it. But to me, the only time I’m ok with someone telling me to suspend reason and check my mind at the door is when I’m about to begrudgingly watch a sci-fi movie. Not when I’m dealing with a faith that I am trying to communicate and teach to people. Telling someone to just suspend reason is something I’m just not ok with. There have been some scholars who have tried to deal with this issue in their own way. One example, is that a professor of oceanography at Florida State University tried to do a historical/scientific study to explain this and came up with the conclusion that Jesus did in fact walk on water but that it was more likely that he walked on an isolated patch of floating ice. You hear that and you say, really, like in middle of modern day Israel and Jordan—floating ice? But what his study did is point to a rare combination of optimal water and atmospheric conditions for the development of a unique, localized freezing phenomenon that he and his co-authors call “springs ice.”

In what is now northern Israel, such ice could have formed on the cold freshwater surface of Lake Gennesaret when already chilly temperatures briefly plummeted during one of the two protracted cold periods between 2,500 and 1,500 years ago. The journal article about this went on to say, “A frozen patch floating on the surface of the small lake would have been difficult to distinguish from the unfrozen water surrounding it. The unfrozen water was comprised of the plumes resulting from salty springs situated along the lake’s western shore—an area where many archeological findings related to Jesus have been documented.

Now that’s interesting. It’s a fascinating take. It’s fodder for discussion, most certainly, but I think there’s more to this story. In fact, I’m not so concerned about the logistics and the mechanics of this walking on water business. In fact, that’s the part of the story that I’m least captivated by. Because we get caught up on this water business so much that the most common interpretation of this story is this: The disciples are in a boat that gets battered by waves, they get scared, Peter is a hero, he steps out of the boat, he musters the courage to be God-like and he has the faith to get out of the boat. And of course, that’s a display of a

lot of faith to get out of a boat in the middle of the ocean expecting to be ok. But he does it anyway. And what this communicates is this idea that with enough faith you too can walk straight to Jesus. And maybe you can do it better than Peter, because he made the mistake of getting scared, so if you don't get scared, you can just do it better than he did and just walk straight to Jesus. Nadia Bolz Weber, a Lutheran minister who's books we've read here together says this—the in a nut shell sermon that most often gets preached on this text is this: the moral of this story she says is that if you in your life are not God-like in your ability to financially prosper or overcome all your failings as a human or defy the forces of nature and walk on water then the problem is that you don't have enough faith and you should really muster up some more because the thing is, it's all up to you to make your way to Jesus. So, don't be afraid. Get out of the boat but be better at it than Peter and don't take your eyes off of Jesus. You can do it if you really try."

Good luck with that. That's not what I'm here to preach. If someone tells me that the solution to my problems is to have more faith so I can make my way to Jesus and that I can do it if I just try hard enough—that's not good news to me. That's a capitalist, consumerist argument, if I've ever heard one. If you don't have something, you need to just acquire it, and if you can't acquire it, you're clearly not trying hard enough. Yeah, no. I'm not here for that.

What I **am** interested in is what this story tells us about ourselves?

None of us are here, sitting in these pews, because a preacher somewhere told us to try harder and have more faith. But we are here because some aspect of these stories has claimed us. Something has compelled us—whether it was something that formed us from the time we were children or something we've come to discover much later on—there is something about these stories that keeps us curious. There is something about who Jesus is as a person and as an example of resistance in the face of empire that we feel we need right now now. There is something about communities like this one that form themselves around these stories that has activated something within us. The reason these old ancient stories have had the lasting impact they've had is because they tell us something about who we are, right now. This story is an opportunity not to fixate on the walking on water business, but it's an opportunity to see who we are and who God is to us. Because in this story if you pay close attention you might recognize yourself in it.

You might be the one who is in the boat afraid. So caught up in the fear of making the wrong decision that you can't make any decision at all. Or maybe you are like the one experiencing the thrill of stepping into the unknown—maybe you are about to start something new, something you have no map for, no directions on where to go and you are excited by the adventure of all. Maybe you are leaving the familiar and going into the boat toward the unfamiliar and like Peter maybe the first steps are ok but then it gets scary. Or maybe the one who is seated right next to you is the one who is sinking, maybe you feel like you're the one sinking because what you could handle last week is not what you have the capacity for this week. Or maybe you feel like you are at your wits end and exasperated and that you are the one who Jesus has reached down to catch and his hand is all you have right now and you're just clinging to it. Or maybe you're sitting in the boat just amazed by it all. Perplexed and wondrous at this scene unfolding before you. And very likely, at some point in your journey you've been each of these characters. You've been in every seat on this boat. You've shuffled around so much you know every seat this boat has.

Church often likes to tell people not who they are but who they should be. You should have faith. You should walk on water. You should be the one with your eyes always on Jesus. You should, if you try hard enough, be the one who makes it to him. You should be the one who doesn't sink. But this misses the point. The point of this story is that it shows us who we are. We are all of those people in the boat. Each one of them. Brave, scared, lonely, content, anxious, terrified, exhilarated—and to every single person in that boat Jesus said to them, "It is I, do not be afraid." And despite Peter climbing out of the boat and doing his heroic thing, all the while Jesus is still coming toward all of them. It's not about who we should be, it's about who we are. And Jesus knows who we are. And not despite that, but because of it, is continually moving towards us. The heroism of Peter distracts us so much that we forget the part of the story where Jesus all the while is continuing to move forward, toward a boat full of freaked out people.

The miracle of this story isn't that Peter walked on water or that Jesus walked on water or floating ice or whatever Florida State thinks it was, the miracle of this story is that Jesus knows us and walks toward us. And that no matter who we are or what season of life we find ourselves in, there is a character in that boat that represents us, and no less, Jesus walks toward every single one of us. Jesus draws close. Jesus is on the move. He is on the move towards us. Always and continually. Jesus is telling us it is I, do not be afraid. The miracle to me isn't this fantastical stuff about water or Peter walking on water and then sinking, it's not about this message about trying hard or having faith—the miracle, is that God sees our story and knows us, knows the anxiety, the bravery, the fear, the new beginnings, the steps we are taking into the unfamiliar, whatever our stuff is, and makes the **choice** to walk towards us, cutting through it all, cutting through all of the impossibilities, all of the things impossible and insurmountable—finding us even in the middle of a remote sea—to name us and claim us and show us who we are.

This is a story about us. In it we see who we are. Not who we can be, but who we are right now. And the miracle is Jesus proclaims that beautiful, holy, and blessed. And will even walk over water to make sure we know that.

Praise be to God.

Amen.