

Truly, You Are the Son of God

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-36

Sermon Series: Matthew

Topic: Jesus

Let's pray.

I wonder, if before we begin this morning, you would do me a favor and take out that small electronic device in your pocket or your purse and turn it off for the next 30 minutes or so. If you need to have it on for emergency purposes, that's, of course, totally fine.

Some of you are wondering, "Do I even know how to turn this thing off?" Yes, it can be turned off. Don't worry, if the apocalypse happens, we have some Gen Zers who will let us know. They have their ways. Somehow my 11-year old always knows the score of the Celtics game even though he doesn't have a phone or computer. I'm like "How did you know that." And he just replies, "I have my ways, dad."

In all seriousness, we all know how distracting that little device can be even when it's not being used. Let's, for the next few minutes, practice what some have called "digital asceticism"—severing that digital cord that inhibits our freedom to engage in deep thought and focused affection on God.

I have a really strong hunch that the Lord may have something to share with some of you over these next few minutes and that the enemy will do whatever it takes to keep you from hearing God's voice. Let's not give the devil ammunition. The Bible says "sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you, but you must master it." Let's master it.

Our passage this morning comes from Matthew 14:22-36. It's one that should be familiar to many of us. In fact, you've likely heard several sermons and Bible studies on this story of Peter walking on water. When I first considered how I would preach this text, I was surprised to find that the heading in my Bible (and perhaps in yours) said "Jesus walks on water." I was surprised

because I was fully expecting it to say “Peter walks on water.” I’ve also thought of Peter as the main actor in this narrative.

Perhaps like you, most sermons I’ve heard preached on this passage focus on Peter—how Peter had enough faith to get out of the boat and walk on water, but when he took his eyes off Jesus and focused instead on the circumstances around him, he sank. A short search in YouTube will give you sermons on this passage with titles like “Walking on Water 101,” “Dare to Leave the Boat,” and “Fearless.”

Please don’t misunderstand me. I think there is a lot we can learn from Peter in this story (and we’re going to look at some of those lessons), but my suggestion to you this morning is that this text has far more to teach us about what it means to be a follower of Jesus than how we can avoid the mistakes of Peter.

And I think we’ll see that Matthew wants the focus to be on Jesus.

As a disciple of Jesus, as an apprentice of Jesus, I want to know everything about how he conducts himself, his practices, his routines. I want to know who he is.

In our LIFE Group this past year we’ve been studying some of the ancient practices of Jesus—things like Sabbath, prayer, and fasting—and how they are meant to form a rule of life or set of habits for the believer that center our lives around Jesus, for the purpose of becoming like him.

One of the things I’ve realized after trying to incorporate some of these practices, along with those in our group, into my own life this past year is that where you start often determines where you end up. In other words, if you look to anyone or anything other than Jesus for direction in your life, there’s no assurance that you will end up where you want to go.

Now, some of you may know that I’m a Kiwi at heart. I was born in New Zealand and have family there. And, if you know anything about Kiwis, you know that there really into sailing. This makes sense. New Zealand is a small island in the Pacific, 1200 miles from Australia, that often doesn’t even make it on world maps.

So, growing up, I remember always following the America’s Cup boat race, which takes place every couple of years (it’s actually set to take place again this August in Barcelona). Despite being just a few million people, New Zealand has pretty much dominated the race over the last 40 years or so. They are the current cup holders and will be defending it at this next race (they don’t have anything to worry about).

If you watch the race, one of the distinct things you’ll notice is how the boats start the race. The race is always between just two boats, and because they’re on the water, they can’t start from a standing position in the water, **so they do what is called “pre-start tactics.”** Basically, you

have 3 minutes for a pre-start and the object is to have your boat cross the start line just as these 3 minutes come to an end; otherwise, you face a penalty and you have to slow down.

The positioning of the boat within these 3 minutes is crucial. For example, the side you come in on matters because of the direction of the wind, it also matters if you end up behind the other boat, which could cause a loss of wind and a bumpier ride. How you start, then, as you might expect, has a huge impact on your chances of winning.

It's the same for us as Christians. Where we start will determine where we end up.

If our starting point is always looking for answers in the shortcomings of man, we'll likely end up disappointed. This is not to say that we can't learn from Peter's lack of faith (even though we may relate more closely to him than Jesus), but I think we would do well to focus on who the Bible calls the "author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2).

Brother, sister, friend, Jesus is the answer to whatever it is you are going through—whether you are dealing with a difficult person at work, your marriage is a wreck, your kids won't speak to you, infertility. Look to him for strength, look to him for inner peace, look to him for a sense of belonging, look to him for the strength to resist temptation.

As we will see in our passage this morning, all authority under heaven and earth has been given to Jesus.

This is a king who had compassion on the hungry crowds as they listened to him, and fed them, this is a King who knows the number of hairs on your head, this is a King who knows when the smallest bird falls from the sky. Have you ever heard of a King like this? This is our king.

At this point, you may be saying, "Chris, this all sound great, but what I need right now is some how to's from the life of Peter to get me back on track, to assure me that everything is going to be okay.

Church, the most important thing I can say to you this morning is not "Follow these 10 steps to success," it's "Adopt the teachings and practices of Jesus." Jesus said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Rest comes from adopting the rhythms of grace taught by our Lord and master. I've said this many times before, but it bears repeating, you will never find rest for your soul, until you find rest in him.

Okay, so what are those teachings, those practices from Jesus that we see in our passage today? What can we learn about who Jesus is that will fuel our worship of him?

First, we see the importance that Jesus places on being alone with his Father.

Look with me, if you will, at verses 22 and 23:

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

Maybe you heard, but the Celtics just won the NBA championship last week. After they won, I'm pretty sure they weren't handing the Celtic players ski goggles so that they could rush away and be alone. They went immediately to the locker room to celebrate, the start of a long week of celebrating. In fact, my son and I went downtown last Friday to join in on that celebration as they paraded through the streets of Boston.

If you were here last week, you'll remember that Jesus had just miraculously fed thousands of people with a little boy's lunch. *You might think* that Jesus would want to celebrate with his disciples after such an amazing miracle. In fact, we read in John's gospel that after this miracle, the people were ready to take Jesus by force and make him king.

But what does Jesus do? He retreats to the hills...to pray...alone.

This, of course, was Jesus' original intention until he was cut short by the crowds. And this may also explain his insistence to the disciples to leave immediately to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

Now, getting alone for Jesus could not have been easy, but we read that he dismissed the crowds, went up in to the mountains to pray, and by evening he was alone.

When was the last time you simply sat with Jesus—no cell phone, no to-do list, just you and God?

Why don't we do this more often?

Well, you see, for many of us—myself included—we've bought into the cultural myth that sitting still, waiting, is a waste of time. Jesus didn't consider solitude a waste of time. In fact, we will read in just a minute that Jesus catches up with his disciples in the fourth watch of the night, which means it was likely some time before 3 or 6 am. He had undoubtedly been sitting with his Father for quite some time before leaving to catch up with his disciples.

Before we move on, I think it would be good for us to camp out here for a bit and reflect on the importance of solitude in the Christian life.

What is solitude?

Solitude, according to one pastor, is simply being still and quiet in the presence of the Lord. Don't be fooled, though. It's not doing nothing. There's nothing particularly spiritual or redemptive about silence. Solitude is an intentional being present with the Lord for the purpose of soulcare and spiritual formation.

Author Sue Monk Kidd says this about solitude,

"When you're waiting, you're not doing nothing. You're doing the most important something there is. You're allowing your soul to grow up. If you can't be still and wait, you can't become what God created you to be."

— Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred*

If you haven't made this a practice in your life, the first thing you'll notice if you give it a try is that it's hard work keeping out all the things that pop into your head. Being intentionally present with the Lord is a skill. I know when I sit with the Lord, the first few minutes are full of random thoughts—did I call that person back, is there a school form I was supposed to fill out, does the Scrub Daddy really work? I heard one pastor say when he sits with the Lord, the first few minutes his mind is like a snow globe that's been shaken up, and it's not until after a few minutes, after the glitter begins to settle, that his mind is open to hearing from the Lord.

I'm working on having this be a regular practice in my own life, but I'm far from where I want to be. But one thing I'm realizing is that it gets easier to sit in contemplative prayer with Jesus, the more I do it. If you have a best friend, you probably know what I mean. When you first meet someone, you often feel the need to fill every moment of your time together with words. But, with a best friend, you can sit in complete silence and feel at ease with that person. It's the same with the Lord. The more you get to know him, the more comfortable you become just sitting in his presence.

I just finished reading Jonathan Haidt's new book, *Anxious Generation*, which talks about the great rewiring of adolescent brains that has been taking place since the invention of the smart phone and social media apps. It's not a book for the faint of heart. The prognosis is not good. Haidt makes a compelling case that social media is actually the cause of the rise in rates of depression and anxiety among teens today.

But we don't need a book to tell us that we live in a hyper-distracted world, where we feel the need to fill every second of our day with content. Experts tell us that working adults focus on a single task for an average of 3 min. at a time before moving on to something else. I used to work in marketing, and I knew this to be true. We were thrilled when someone would spend more than a few seconds reading a marketing email.

All of this has led to far less capacity for deep work and attention on things that really matter and a longing for lasting peace and calm.

Into this milieu comes the practice of solitude modeled by Jesus. When we look at his life, we see that he's never in a hurry—he doesn't begin his earthly ministry until he is around 30 years old, he doesn't rush to heal Lazarus when he first hears he is sick, knowing that he will soon die, he's not in a rush to meet up with the disciples, knowing that a storm is coming. Jesus simply refuses to allow anything to distract him from his time alone with his Father.

This is why it is so easy for us in our pursuit of holiness, of spiritual formation, to get ahead of Jesus. We are constantly in a hurry and Jesus is not. Dallas Willard calls hurry the "greatest enemy of the spiritual life today." What does Jesus say to Peter when Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that he will suffer and die? That's right, he said, "Get *behind me*, Satan." Peter's agenda had outpaced Jesus' agenda. Peter had plans. He knew how this was all suppose to end—with Jesus on an throne, celebrated by the Jewish masses as the coming Messiah who would free his people from captivity from all earthly authorities.

Jesus' firm response to Peter makes one wonder if a noisy and hurried inner life, at its core, is *not* just a product of living in a hyper-distracted society, but actually something very ancient, namely, the tendency by all of us to get ahead of Jesus—to assume we know what is best for our lives, how to reach that coveted state of rest, and to assume we know where our lives are headed, how this story ends.

Simply put, solitude is aligning our pace with Jesus' pace. More than that, it's a means by which we give God margin to work his plan out in our lives on his timetable, not ours. Peter later figured this out. This is why he could write in **2 Peter 3:8-9**, "**But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent**" (NLT).

So, first, we see the importance that Jesus places on being alone with his Father.

Second, we see the complete authority of Jesus.

Let's keep reading. Read with me beginning in verse 24:

24 but the boat by this time was a long way from the land [Mark tells us that their boat was "in the middle of lake"; the northernmost section of the Sea of Galilee is roughly 7 ½ miles wide; so, we can safely assume that they were at least 3 miles out], **beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them.** [Again, Mark's gospel tells us that they were in "serious trouble"] **25 And in the fourth watch of the night** [the Romans divided the night from sunset to sunrise into 4 watches; Jesus, therefore, likely approached the boat some time between 3 and 6 am in the morning] **he came to them, walking on the sea.**

Can we just stop there for a moment and point out the obvious. Jesus walked on water. I love how Jesus doesn't think of obstacles the same way that we do. Jesus comes to them walking on the sea. I'm astounded at how Jesus has complete control over the laws of gravity.

What are we to make of this miracle of Jesus walking on water?

Well, it's clear that Jesus has complete authority over creation. But I think there may be more going on here that Matthew wants us to see.

One of the things that was brought to my attention by a former pastor of mine this week is that Matthew, over and over again, in his gospel, is concerned with weaving the outworking of Christ's Great Commission into the stories that he tells. Now, you'll remember that the Great Commission comes at the very close of Matthew's gospel, in chapter 28.

Now, for those of you who may not be familiar with the Great Commission. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus spells out his intentions for his kingdom people by commissioning them to go and make disciples (followers of Jesus), baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that Christ taught. And he prefaces this Great Commission by stating that "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

But the Great Commission is not simply a manifesto tacked on to the end of the book of Matthew; it's on every page of Matthew's gospel. On almost every page of Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus doing miracles and teaching with the expressed purpose of making more disciples. He performs a miracle and then teaches them through parables, ultimately, with the intent, of making more disciples.

And I think that could be what Matthew is wanting us to see here.

Here, Jesus walking on water is meant to show his authority over creation as the true image bearer of God who has complete dominion and control over all of God's creation, but Matthew is also telling us this story because he is intent on making more disciples of Jesus.

Another clear example of this is found in **Matthew 9:35-38**. There, we read,

³⁵ And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

The purpose of Jesus's miracles here is to show his authority, but it is also to make disciples. Very often we see Jesus' miracles followed up by an explicit teaching or statement of an OT fulfillment. Look again at verses 37 and 38: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." It's almost as if the more clearly we see Jesus' authority manifested, the more strongly we are compelled to follow him. And this is still true today.

Brother/Sister, friend, there is no illness, no broken relationship that Jesus cannot heal. There is no storm he cannot calm. He holds the universe together, he sustains all things by the power of his word, he has complete authority over all of creation, and he is a compassionate Savior who is fully worthy of your wholehearted trust and admiration.

Not only does Jesus have authority over creation, but we see that he also has authority over sickness. In the paragraph immediately following the miracle of Jesus walking on water, we read that the sick in the town of Gennesaret were healed simply by touching the fringe of his robe. It's likely that the story we read about in Matthew 9 of the women who suffered from bleeding for 12 years who, simply by touching Jesus' robe, was healed, had gotten out.

It's interesting to me what Jesus does not do here. He doesn't pause to pray to his Father to heal the people; instead, they are healed simply by touching his robe, giving further clarity to his authority and his identity as the Son of God.

Let's return now to the boat.

Even though Jesus is calmly walking on water towards them, he makes clear that the disciples were utterly terrified. Read with me, starting in verse 26:

²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" [the Greek word here is *phantasma*, literally, "an apparition"; there are other uses of this term in Scripture that point to the disciples likely thinking this was a theophany or a manifestation of God, not necessarily the ghost of a dead fisherman, for example] **and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."** [the Greek here for the phrase "it is I" is *ego eimi*, literally "I am"; some commentators, then, have taken this to be a direct reference to Yahweh's identification of himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14, where God says to Moses, "Tell the people that I am has sent me to you"; so, Jesus is essentially saying, "Take heart, I am"—a direct confirmation of his deity].

²⁸ And 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 and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out

his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

There's several interesting things going on here.

First of all, Peter addresses Jesus as Lord, showing that he already, in some sense, recognized his deity.

Second, he asks Jesus to command him to come. We don't know exactly why he does this, but we do know that this was not the first time Jesus had asked Peter to come. Just a few years earlier he saw Peter, then Simon, and his brother, Andrew, casting their nets on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and asked Peter, an ordinary fisherman, to come and follow him. Peter, as you'll recall, immediately puts down his nets and follows Jesus. And just as he had done before, Peter, without hesitation, follows Jesus, only this time onto a turbulent sea. We're often quick to judge Peter, but here he shows tremendous faith. We see here that he believed that Jesus could enable an ordinary fisherman, an ordinary disciple to walk on water.

Third, we have no idea how far Jesus was from the boat—we're simply not told this information. All we know is that Peter got out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus. We also know that he had come far enough so that all Jesus had to do when he began to sink was reach out his hand to lift him up, indicating that he likely walked a considerable distance.

So far, so good. Peter's faith had gotten him out the boat. It had even gotten him some distance from the boat. But, the text says, "when he saw the wind, he was afraid." And then he began to sink.

One of the highlights of being a dad is being able to teach your kids how to ride a bike. I'm currently teaching Adonai. It's going good. She's getting it. This is the third child I've taught to ride a bike, so I kind of consider myself somewhat of an expert at this point. I've learned that there are stages to teaching your kid how to ride a bike. There's the "hold on to me and the bike and don't you dare let go" stage. Then, after that, there's the "just hold on to my seat and don't your dare let go" stage. Then, you progress to the "run beside me with your hands ready to catch me at any moment" stage. And, then, finally, there's the "Dad, I've got this" stage.

Now, somewhere between the "Hold on to my seat and don't you dare let go" and "Run beside me" stages, there's a singular moment in which I let go of my grip on the seat and transfer ownership of the bike over to my child. Now, my child doesn't know when this moment occurs. All they know is that daddy is right there ready to catch them if they begin to fall. What I've seen with all three of my kids, though, is that the second they realize daddy's no longer actually holding the seat, they crash and burn. But as long as they *think* I'm holding the bike (even though I'm not), they're fine.

I tend to think this is what happened to Peter and what happens to us. The minute our faith shifts from Christ as the object of our faith to our own abilities to navigate the circumstances of life, we sink. In other words, our faith is only as strong as the object of our faith. If the object of my faith is Christ, if my eyes are focused on him, I'm fine. But the minute my eyes begin to wander and the object of my faith becomes me and my own ability to keep myself afloat, I'm in trouble.

And just like when I grab the bike seat right before my child swerves and crashes on the pavement (at least, most of the times I grab it), so too Jesus, without fail, hears our cry for help and reaches down to lift us up and keeps us from drowning.

I like to think that when Jesus said to Peter, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt," it wasn't a rebuke but more of a rhetorical question. So, my translation of this text would go something like this: "Hey, Peter, it's me. Did you really think I would let you sink?"

It's possible that Jesus is saying exactly this to some of you here this morning. He's saying, "Hey, it's me. Did you really think I would leave you to figure things out on your own. I've proven myself faithful to you in the past. I'm not going anywhere. I'm running beside the bike, ready to catch you if you start to fall. I know things are tough, but just focus on me and you'll find rest for your soul."

So, my question to you this morning is Where's your focus? Where are you fixing your gaze?

I love how the Psalmist puts it in Psalm 121: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? ² My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Meanwhile, the disciples are in the boat, taking all of this in. In verse 32, we read,

³² And when [Jesus and Peter] got into the boat, the wind ceased [this has happened before, but hear Jesus doesn't rebuke the winds; his authority over creation is astounding] **³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."**

This is the main point of this passage. This is the culmination of this text. This is what Matthew wants us to learn—that Jesus is the Son of God and worthy of all our worship.

If you're a sports fan (as I am), unless you've been living under a rock for the last 6 months, you'll undoubtedly have heard the name, Caitlin Clark. For those of you who don't know, Caitlin Clark is a professional basketball player who plays for the Indiana Fever, and this past

Spring, while playing for the Iowa Hawkeyes, she became the all-time leading scorer in college basketball, beating Pete Maravich's record.

Wherever she plays, her games are sold out. TV ratings for women's basketball have never been higher. In fact, the "Caitlin Clark Effect" has led to WNBA players being given chartered flights to their games for the first time in the history of the league.

Needless to say, Clark has created a fanbase unrivaled by *any* sports star. People like myself who have never been interested in women's basketball, are suddenly tuning in.

A few months ago, **I came across this photo in the Wall Street Journal**, which I find fascinating. I've never seen a more vivid picture of a group of people caught up in worship. Talk about pure jubilation. Just look at 'em. There's no sense of self-awareness. They are completely free and unencumbered. They are simply throwing up their arms in awe of what they've just witnessed.

I like to think that this was the case for the disciples as they sat there in the boat, exhausted, at 6 am in the morning, looking out over the calm, glass-like water as the sun rose up over the horizon. There were no words to describe what they had just witnessed other than, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

Even though they had witnessed several of Christ's miracles up to this point, this was the first instance we have of the disciples using this title, "Son of God," to describe Jesus. This title, of course, would later be used by Peter in Matthew 16 in response to Jesus' question to him of "Who do you say that I am?" Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

It's hard to imagine that the disciples understood Jesus to be the second person of the Trinity at this stage, but however they understood him, they knew he was more than just a Jewish king from the line of David.

Again, there is much to be learned from the story of Peter walking on water and sinking, but Matthew would have us focus on the ever-expanding realization by the disciples that Jesus was ushering in a new kind of kingdom as a new kind of king. And he alone is worthy of our worship.

And what's even more incredible, for those of us living on this side of the cross, we've been given the full revelation of the plan of God in the person of Jesus Christ. We know Jesus to be fully God and fully man, the second person of the Trinity, the one who is greater than Moses, greater than the angels, the one to whom all will one day bow the knee. The one of whom the apostle Paul can say,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or

dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Truly, he is the Son of God.

Let's pray.

