

SERMON TITLE: "Living Water: Walking Water"
SERMON TEXT: John 5:1-18 and 6:16-21
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 15, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

When most people think of water recreation, they think of swimming, boating, and waterskiing. Or maybe they think of wading-boot fishing, river rafting, or scuba diving. For many of us, though, water recreation and pleasures don't have to be quite so wet and immersive. Just being near the water is a wonderful thing. We like to look at it, cruise on it, camp by it, listen to it, or hike alongside it. In July, when Steve and I were on vacation in Oregon, we went to the coast and enjoyed walking along the beach. One of Ogden's really nice features is the River Park Walkway, which allows people to walk along the Ogden River anywhere from the canyon to its confluence with the Weber River.

For several weeks, we've been focusing our attention on the living water stories in the Gospel of John. We began with the story of Jesus turning water into wine and asked ourselves what that "transforming water" might be like in our lives. Then we read the story of Jesus' nighttime conversation with Nicodemus and pondered the importance of "birthing water." Last Sunday, we read the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, and we refreshed ourselves in "gushing water."

Today, we've moved on to John 5, in which Jesus told the lame man lying by the pool to stand up and walk. And, in John 6, we read about Jesus walking on the water. So, I invite you to step closer and consider what the gospel writer is telling us through these stories of "walking water."

1—WALKING WATER ACKNOWLEDGES TROUBLE

Maybe the first place to begin with both these stories is that walking water acknowledges trouble. For all its necessary, helpful, and fun aspects, water is also associated with scary and dangerous problems.

In John 5, the man lying by the pool knew about this trouble. He came there regularly and stayed for lengths of time because he hoped that the water could heal him. Kind of like people in Utah go to Crystal Hot Springs in Honeyville or to Lava Hot Springs in Idaho for the soothing and restorative properties of the warm mineral water, this man and others who were blind, lame, and paralyzed went to this pool in Jerusalem in the hope of curing their disabilities. They believed that—whenever the water was stirred by an angel of the Lord—whoever got into the water first would be healed. That was the positive side of the story. But the downside, the troubling side, was that the sickest and most crippled were the least able to get into the water at the right moment. Day after day, month after month, decade after decade—the healthiest and strongest got into the water first and used up the benefits, leaving the sickest ones to suffer even more. The man with whom Jesus spoke had been trying for 38 years and still had never been agile enough to get into the water first.

Maybe you've been in a situation like that. Your chance of success is about like your odds of winning the lottery jackpot. Of course it would be fantastic to win! But is it worth the effort and cost to keep trying, only to fail over and over again? Is it worth staying in a particular job, hoping that the boss will recognize your worth and give you a promotion—even though you've been passed over so many times already? Is it worth giving more money to your son, sister, or cousin in the hope that this time, finally, they will use it wisely? Is it worth filling out yet another online dating profile in the hope that this time it will initiate a relationship of true love and companionship? I suspect all of us have been acquainted, at some time or other, with this kind of trouble.

And then there's the walking water story in John 6. The disciples were in a boat out on the sea when a storm came up. The disciples depended on water for their fishing livelihood and for their transportation as they spread the gospel to many different towns and villages. Water was an essential and familiar part of their lives. But it was also dangerous. The strong wind and the rough sea spelled trouble.

We know about the trouble of water from the many drowning stories in our Utah news this summer. An August 9th article in *The Salt Lake Tribune* told about a California family that was on vacation at Lake Powell. At one point, they stopped their boat in a cove, and two of the children were swimming in the water. When the father noticed that the children were struggling to keep their heads above the surface, he jumped in to save them. He was able to get the kids back up on the boat, but the exhausted father slipped underwater. It took rescuers about 10 minutes to pull him up, and he was pronounced dead on the beach. And the word to the wise, once again, was, *Be sure to wear life vests and use flotation devices!* Yes, water is fun and essential to our lives. But we need to have a healthy respect for how dangerous water can be. Walking water can certainly be associated with trouble.

2—WALKING WATER DEMONSTRATES JESUS' POWER TO OVERCOME TROUBLE

Of course, the gospel writer didn't include these two walking water stories just to acknowledge frustrating and dangerous trouble. More importantly, walking water demonstrates Jesus' power to overcome trouble. When Jesus encountered the lame man by the pool, Jesus didn't ignore him or leave him in his misery. Acting on behalf of his Father, Jesus worked a miracle of healing. Right there beside the water, Jesus told the man to stand up, take his mat, and walk. And that he did. The man who had lain by the pool for 38 years with no help and no healing suddenly was able to stand up and walk.

Jesus' power to overcome trouble is also seen in the story of walking on the water. It's hard to tell whether the disciples were more afraid of the rough waters caused by the windstorm or by seeing Jesus walking on the sea. But, either way, they were eventually calmed and comforted by Jesus' words and actions. John 6:21 tells us that, once Jesus was in the boat with them, they immediately arrived at the safety of the land where they were going.

Whether we're traveling by boats on water; worrying about floods, deluges, or droughts; or facing other troubling situations with our health, finances, or relationships—the walking water message is clearly good news. In the words of an old hymn,

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love.¹

Whatever our concerns, whatever our problems, Jesus has the power to overcome our troubles.

3—WALKING WATER DECLARES THAT JESUS IS DIVINE

The writer of the Gospel of John wasn't only drawing attention to human troubles or Jesus' power to solve them, however. By including these two walking water stories, the gospel writer was also making a theological point. He wanted his readers to understand and believe that walking water declares that Jesus is divine.

It's not clear if the man healed by the pool completely understood who Jesus was. But, because the healing and mat-carrying were against the Jewish law of no work on the Sabbath day, Jesus gained the attention of the Jewish authorities. "Who does he think he is?!" they probably exclaimed. And, yet, they already perceived correctly that Jesus believed that he was doing God's work. Jesus believed that his miracles were performed by the power of God. Jesus believed that his divinely-inspired and compassionate mission to improve the well-being of others superseded even the law about not working on the Sabbath because Jesus believed that he was one with God.

It's no wonder that this understanding of Jesus was controversial. It challenged the status quo and current Jewish teachings. But the Gospel of John was very carefully written to show that this new Jesus was truly one with the traditional God of Jewish beliefs. The walking on water story in John 6 is soaked with divine imagery that helps the reader connect Jesus with God.

Listen to these Old Testament references to God and water:

- Job 9:8 indicates that God moves mountains, commands the sun, stretches out the heavens, and "trampled the waves of the sea."
- In Isaiah 43, God says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you . . . For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior . . . Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters" (vv. 2a, 3a, and 16).

- Psalm 77:19 declares about God, “Your way was through the sea, your path through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.”
- And Psalm 107:28-30 says, “They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed . . . and he brought them to their desired haven.”

Everything about the John 6 story of the disciples and Jesus on the sea was written to convey divine power at work in and through Jesus. God’s work was Jesus’ work. Jesus’ miracles were God’s miracles. They were one and the same. Yes, walking water declares that Jesus is divine.

CONCLUSION

Earlier in the service we started a “walking water” science experiment. Take another look! We can now see how the red, yellow, and blue-colored water “walked” up and down into the neighboring cups and created blended colors of orange, green, and purple and formed a pretty rainbow.

The website where I found this science experiment explained that “the water moves up the paper towels through a process called capillary action . . . The water is able to move upward against [the law of] gravity because of the attractive forces between the water and the fibers in the paper towel.” It’s this same property that “helps water climb from a plant’s roots to the leaves at the top of the plant or tree.”

Maybe it was a similarly wondrous property that allowed the man to stand up and walk beside the pool and for Jesus to walk on the stormy sea. Walking water is definitely a miracle of God. Whether we remember this through the rainbow-colored water of this science experiment or by the biblical stories, I hope we can hold onto the truth that Jesus, the divine Son of God, has the power to overcome our troubles. This is the message of walking water.

¹Lyrics by Priscilla J. Owens (1829-1907). Date of composition unknown.

²<https://funlearningforkids.com/rainbow-walking-water-science-experiment-kids/>