

**Ride the Waves or Control the Ocean?**  
**Reflections from Matthew 14**  
By [Mark L. Vincent](#)

Life is an ocean and we meet it at its pounding surf. The waves never stop. Eventually they will overwhelm us and we will succumb to their relentless pounding. Our choice is whether we will ride the waves for as long as we can, or whether we will try to control the ocean.

Consider the difference between these two images:



or



I say this as one who loves to body surf. Weak swimmer that I am, body surfing close to the shore in a pounding surf is more my speed than surfing. When you have consistently great surf to ride, you experience both the thrill of a great ride, and the unforgiving power of the ocean.

Three times I have experienced the great power of these waves. Two were on the same day. It was at a beach in the Dominican Republic, where seven footers kept rolling in. After a great morning of wonderful rides, I got knocked over into a series of prone backwards summersaults, nearly breaking my back and depositing me with water-filled lungs on the shore.

I sat on the shore for a while getting myself back in shape and mustering up the courage to try again, afraid I might not. I got back in and began enjoying myself again until I got caught in an undertow and was quickly being carried out to sea. I am grateful to God that I had enough of my head not to thrash around. I gently swam sideways until I was out of the current and able to return to the shore.

The third time was on a trip to Australia, when Lorie and I had a day at the beach. Lorie decided the water was too cold and sat on the beach reading her book. I was getting some consistently long rides on a body board. After the best one of the day I made the mistake of keeping my back to the ocean while I whooped and hollered and made sure Lorie had seen it. Meanwhile, the ocean was piling up behind me, draining all the water underfoot. I turned around and was smashed by the biggest wave of the day, coming way up on shore, knocking me over backwards and lacerating my scalp in the coral sands.

Was it worth the danger for the thrilling rides? For me, yes! But this is simply a metaphor, and the metaphor is what is important here. The question is not whether you like body-surfing; it is whether you will plunge into the ocean of life. Will you find to the waves and find joy in what you cannot control? Or, will you stand on the edge of the shore shouting instructions that get lost in the wind?

Trying to control this ocean is a sure path to frustration, disappointment and bitterness. Think of the great wounds of your life and you are quickly in touch with what you could not control in spite of your preferences. And yet, we devote vast amounts of our energy to make life (and other people) respond to our demands, building up those frustrations and wounds.

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One way to read Matthew 14 is from the viewpoint of Christ's disciples, looking for their responses to the fast flowing waves of what it meant to follow the Messiah.

The chapter offers 4 vignettes, flowing over the top of each other.

### **1. John the Baptist beheaded (vv.1-12)**

This part of the narrative is not written as a current happening, but as a past account connected to Herod's response upon hearing reports about Jesus.

This is such a long ago account that it is difficult to imagine its impact. Try to get your mind around it though. What would it be like if the person who introduced you to forgiveness and a relationship with God was publicly executed as John the Baptist was? How devastated would you be? Would you continue on or despair? The Scriptures do not tell us how the disciples responded; only that they buried John and told Jesus, and that Jesus and the disciples decided to withdraw and get some solitude.

One of my lifelong friends lost his life recently. He had given his life to Christ at a young age, pledged his life in service as a young adult, and spent nearly thirty years in ministry. He and his family served in Illinois, Detroit, Hong Kong, the interior of China, Kosovo, Macedonia, and most recently in France. A number of their experiences were high stress, particularly some of the ongoing threats to peace in Kosovo, and his last, highly toxic pastorate. My friend fell into a deep depression and ultimately took his own life. At his funeral—a gathering of people from all the places he had served—my friend, best man and college roommate was called a *sacrificial lamb*. What a terrible wound this all has been! I am still not beyond it. My friend felt he could not continue. We who loved him face the same decision.

### **2. Jesus feeds a crowd (vv.13-21)**

The people learn where Jesus has gone and stream to where he and his disciples were trying to regain perspective. Jesus has compassion on them and resumes ministering among them.

If we only consider Matthew's gospel account, we might argue that the disciples were compassionate also. They were aware of the time of day and the need for the people to eat. Mark's gospel, usually the most succinct of the accounts, offers greater detail to the conversation. He recounts the protests of the disciples at Jesus' instruction to go ahead and feed the crowd instead of sending them away.

A great leader is executed. In the middle of their grief they are surrounded by a crowd. At the end of the day, with little to no food at hand, they are instructed to feed the crowd. Wave upon wave upon wave!

Again, it is good to ask how we would respond to such an instruction. Instructed to do something beyond your capacity or anything you have witnessed previously, and instructed to do so when you are exhausted, would you be a willing participant or one who walks away shaking your head and continuing to protest?

The first congregation I pastored was 1<sup>st</sup> Mennonite in Fort Wayne, Indiana. It was established by a layman from a nearby town. John Federspiel, it was said, was found dead on his knees in prayer as was his habit. He long held a vision for an urban church—a rescue mission—planted by country folk with a heart for those living in the city. Many of his friends and family could not see its importance or how it might be done. Mennonite leaders in Indiana refused assistance. Finally, Mennonites from Ohio provided help and people, eventually establishing a congregation that continues today and was the forerunner of the Fort Wayne Rescue Mission.

In my travels and work I've come across so many similar stories that I suspect it is the normal course of embracing (surfing) or resisting change. New congregations, the increased capacity of a Christian college, the founding of a retirement community, the purchase of land to build a summer camp for children. Visions like these are met with the many voices of its impossibility, and perhaps a few of faith that it can be done if it is of God.

Sure, many initiatives fail, but those that succeed do so because something was tried. Someone got up on the board and surfed.

We can make the same application to our lives in families and at work. If we believe something is impossible it certainly becomes impossible for us. If, however, we believe something is possible if we but try and remain patient, then possible it might be. We cannot guarantee possibility, but we can ensure impossibility. This is the choice between surfing and trying to control the ocean.

### **3. Jesus walks on the water (vv.22-33)**

There is no letup in the narrative. It is like a suspenseful movie soundtrack—relentless pounding to keep the audience tense and on the edge of its seat. The story moves from John's beheading to the unexpected crowd Jesus chooses to feed in just a few verses. Now the disciples are in a boat unable to make progress in the headwinds and churn of the waves. About three miles out Jesus, who had sent them on ahead, joins them by walking across the water.

The response of nearly all the disciples was terror. In the murky and dim night they conclude that the supernatural is at work—something that should make them afraid, something sinister and unholy. Instead, it is the one who hung the heavens and established this body of water.

We might think of this incident and this response when we hear people giving credit to the devil, or even to God, for what is happening to them. We all too quickly try to categorize and contain what is happening. We jump to try to control our circumstance even when it is far beyond us.

We might keep in mind these words from Isaiah 43:12,13:

*“You are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘That I am God. Yes, and from ancient day I am he. No-one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can refuse it?’”*

Or this from Psalm 115:3:

*“Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.”*

Truly, we cannot control all the circumstances of our lives, but we can decide to surf upon them.

Peter is the one who decides to surf the waves of what he cannot control. He asks to join Jesus walking on the waves and then also discovers terror when it actually begins to happen. Like Peter, our tendency is to think that once we embrace the adventure, the adventure will take place and then we can return to our preferred and self-designed normal. But the ocean is relentless. Each subsequent wave gives way to yet another, and then another, and then yet again and so on. It is an endless pulse of pushing, pushing, pushing. Either we continue on or we sink beneath them.

The promise we find here and in which we take comfort is that Jesus offers courage when the disciples do not have it. He also offers a helping hand to Peter when he needed it. Notice, however, that Jesus does not apologize for scaring the disciples. He does not agree to walk around the lake like normal people would do, or to offer advance warning the next time he does something supernatural. What he does do is offer a reprimand because they failed to believe. Jesus keeps prodding them forward rather than diminishing his expectation so they could be more comfortable.

#### **4. Ministry at Gennesaret (vv.34-36)**

And now, after all this, the disciples are plunged into ministry again, surrounded by crowds looking for answers, seeking healing, wanting an encounter with this man Jesus who might be the Messiah.

We could look at the crowds in contrast with the disciples. The crowd seems to have no pretense. In their suffering they are without dignity and control over their life circumstance. They simply rush to Jesus. The disciples, though, ask questions, offer doubts, resist what comes their way and give into fear, even though they have already been with the Savior through many tests and adventures. I think we are wrong to make this comparison, however.

In spite of natural human responses, the disciples continue in ministry after John’s beheading. They produce what food they have and assist Jesus in feeding the people. They bring Jesus into their wind-tossed boat, offer their worship and recognize him as God’s Son. They continue in ministry when they reach the far shore.

Each time, in spite of their doubt, their fear and their inability to conceive of possibility, they get on their board and ride the surf. They abandon their desire to control just as they had abandoned their fishing nets and tax tables. They place themselves yet again in the currents of God’s Kingdom.

It could all too easily be a point of spiritual pride to say this is a lesson I have learned, but I do you no favors if I do not describe how important this lesson has become for me.

Because I have reached some understanding of it:

a. *the fiscal, physical and emotional trauma of battling cancer has been lessened.* We've learned to embrace the lessons it contains. Lorie and I try to live with and maybe someday through the disease, instead of resenting or trying to control our circumstance.

b. Because we have surfed life's waves again and again—jumping back on the board without delay—we *have experienced how joy can be magnified in one's life.* This is not a happiness that grows from physical comfort or sensual pleasure. Instead, it is the deep and abiding satisfaction that grows from releasing control to God and letting the currents take you where they will, letting the battering waves mold and refine you, rather than shatter selfish dreams.

c. Because we have walked in this way for some time, we know a little of how *more ministry gets accomplished* when one chooses to surf. Part of it is because we keep putting ourselves back in there in spite of suffering, but I think more of it comes because we are no longer seeking affirmation or control. We become too busy surviving and thriving to demand a certain recipe of life preferences must be fulfilled.

Lorie and I came to this conclusion shortly after her original cancer diagnosis and absolutely clueless about how it would play out. We are thankful for the ability to see the wisdom of others who surfed instead of trying to control, and for putting their previous choice to our own use.

Lorie and I are here as the disciples were, full of doubts, fragile and afraid, scared of where God might lead, unable to imagine how God will do it. And yet, by God's grace, we intend to keep riding life's waves until God calls us home, taking comfort that Jesus stands above those waves and offers us courage.

A-men.