

# Imaging the Word: Art and Theology

## Jesus Walks on Water

Matthew 14:22-33

This Sunday's lessons tell the story of Jesus' miracle of walking on water. Jesus has just sent the disciples ahead of him by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, while he stays back to pray. On their way, a great storm erupts on the water and the disciples are frightened. Just then, they see Jesus walking on the water. Peter impulsively tells his Lord to call him out to be with him. But when he does, Peter starts towards Jesus but quickly begins to sink. Jesus then chides Peter for his lack of faith. Setting aside the historicity of the miracle itself, this episode veritably invites a symbolic, metaphorical interpretation, whereby walking on water is synonymous with the exercise of faith, literally "stepping out in faith." This has given rise to the title of the book by pastor John Ortberg, "If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat." Artists, in painting this scene, however, have tended to emphasize Jesus' action as rescuer, savior, portraying Peter as the representative believer, who is in danger of "going under," where the water represents suffering, tribulation, or the guilt of one's sins.

The following group of paintings shows the scene from Matthew's gospel in its narrative context—the disciples in the boat, Peter sinking in the water and Jesus catching Peter before he sinks—with little or no interpretation.



Christ walking on the water icon



Benjamin McPherson (b1976, American), *Jesus Walking on Water*, c2010



David Popiashvili (b 1969, Georgian), *Jesus Calms a Storm*, 2016

In the next several pieces, the artist zeroes in on Jesus and Peter, as the only actors in the scene.



Sieger Köder (German, 1925-2015)



Artist Unknown, Chinese



Walter Rane (American), *Lord, Save Me*, 2009



Jos Speybrouck, Illustration from *Bijbelische Geschiedenis* by Jos Keulers (J.J. Roman & Zonen, Roermond-Maaseik) 1937



Morgan Weistling (American), *Our Refuge, Our Strength*, 1998



Julia Stankova (Bulgarian, b1954), *The Sinking of Peter*, 2005



**Painting by Sharon McGinley**  
The artist attests that she intended this image to represent not the sinking of Peter but the redemption of Judas, who, like Peter, had a slip of faith, so to speak. Very unique!



Violet Oakley, *Traveling Altarpiece, World War II Portable Altarpiece aka 'Christ Walking on the Sea' aka 'Jesus Walking on the Sea', 1944*

During World War II, the Citizens Committee of the Army and Navy commissioned artists to design portable altarpieces for military chapels on land and at sea. Composed of metal or wood, the triptychs could be easily transported and stored when not in use. The artists received an honorarium of \$200 to \$300 for their labor. Twenty-four altarpieces made by Violet Oakley between 1941 and 1946 have been identified, but only a few have been located.

**Edward Knippers (American), *Christ and Peter on the Water*, 2012**

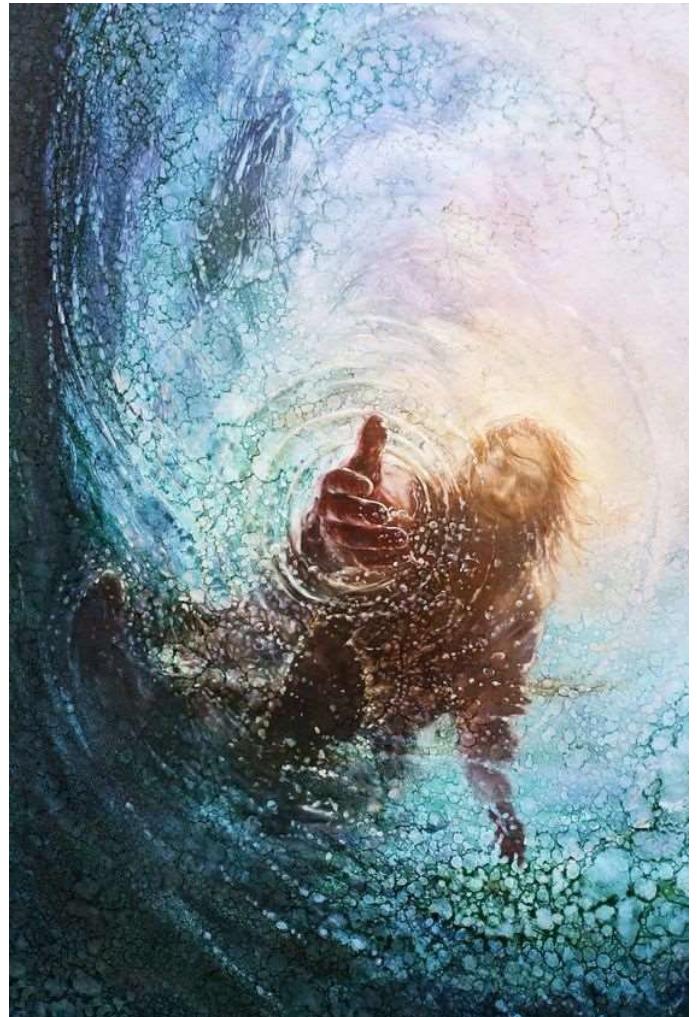
In Knippers' painting of Jesus saving the sinking Peter, the most conspicuous characteristic of the piece is that Jesus is depicted in the nude. This is characteristic of Knippers' paintings in general (one which has at times offended Christian sensibilities). But here the Savior's nudity conveys a sense of vulnerability, even as he saves Peter.





**Sylwia Perczak (Polish, b1977),  
*Lord, Save Me, 2019***

In these next two paintings, the artists depict the story from the point of view of the sinking Peter, completely apart from any larger group of disciples.



**Yongsung Kim (Korean, , *The Hand of God***

Kim offers a unique perspective in his painting, that of one who has already gone under and is in danger of drowning, yet before succumbing, they see their Savior reaching down to rescue.



Juius von Klever (Baltic-German, 1850–1924), *Christ Walking on the Waters*, c1880

These two paintings focus on Jesus alone upon the sea with the boat in the distant background, or else completely absent from the scene. In Hambling's piece (below), even Jesus is hard to find, hidden by the crashing waves. How much does this painting mirror the experience of believers who experience hardship and trials, who feel "at sea amidst the storm"?



Maggi Hambling (British 1945-), *Walking on Water*, 2006



Michael Belk (American), *Life Savior*, 2016

In this final piece, photographer Belk depicts Jesus as a life-guard come to rescue the occupants of a capsized boat. The title is of course a play on 'life saver,' the name of the float ring he carries. Note the cross-shaped symbol on the hull.