

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost A 13 August 2023

Matthew 14:22-33

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace to you and peace from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*Immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'*  
Let's pray: ...

One of my favourite colloquial sayings for when someone is in real strife is: "Up the creek in a barbed-wire canoe without a paddle"; a situation I found myself in regularly as a free-spirited, curious young fella'. In this morning's Gospel, the disciples are in exactly such a predicament.

It must have been terrifying for the disciples that night as they crossed the Sea of Galilee. Imagine jumping into a gigantic washing machine when the agitator is operating; that's the type of predicament the disciples found themselves confronted with. And we need only think about the storms that have blown through our own lives. Think of a time when your life was drenched in that three o'clock in the morning kind of darkness. It's so dark you can't even see your own hand. You don't know what's ahead or when you'll arrive at the new shore. Think of a time when it felt like you were drowning in fear. You began to see ghosts. Something was there. Something was going to get you. Whether you believe in ghosts or not, fear is real. Think of those days when the winds of change were blowing against you and no matter what you did, how hard you rowed, you got nowhere. Maybe there've been really tough times when the events of life battered you over and over like ocean waves. A time when you were "up the creek in a barbed-wire canoe without a paddle."

Storms come in all sorts of different ways to pound individuals, families, churches, nations, and the world. Cancer, divorce, schism, drought, famine, war. Everyone has stories about how their life was blown off course, the structures supporting life were washed away, plans and hopes were damaged or destroyed. And whenever the storms of life toss us about, our faith takes a battering too. We question whether we have faith; whether we have the right kind of faith; whether we have enough faith.

Jesus' question to Peter is one that often plagues us as we cross the sea of life. "You of little faith; why did you doubt?" There's something about that question that attracts casual, flippant, and frankly, poor answers far too easily. "You just need faith. If you had more faith, you'd get what you pray for. If your faith was stronger you wouldn't doubt, struggle, or question so much." That makes me wonder what would've happened if Peter had more faith, enough faith, a stronger faith. The usual answer is that Peter's fear would have disappeared, the wind and waves would have been of no consequence, and Peter would have continued walking on water. To which I say, "bunkum."

There's real danger in this kind of theology and understanding of faith. It says that if we have enough faith, we'll overcome the storms of life in some spectacular, self-determined way. Somehow, we'll transcend the laws of nature, physics, biology. We'll defy gravity. In extreme cases, there're people who'll even refuse medical care because of their faith. Saints, that's not what faith is about. That's more about magic than faith. That type of attitude seeks proof or evidence to support belief.

That kind of thinking won't carry us through life's storms. We'll eventually sink like a rock in water. That's what happened to Peter. Perhaps there's no coincidence that his name in Greek means "stone" or "rock."

Regardless of how much faith we have, disease takes a toll on our body, accidents happen, loved ones die. Despite our faith, life is difficult, relationships break down, we don't always get what we want. No matter how strong our faith might be, the sea of life gets rough and stormy.

Maybe the usual answer is simply wrong. Maybe faith isn't about walking on water through the storms of life but about staying in the boat. With a different kind of faith, Peter would have stayed in the boat. "You of little faith; why did you doubt?" Maybe Jesus is asking why Peter got out of the boat.

After all Jesus is the one who "made the disciples get into the boat." Jesus is the one who told them to "go on ahead to the other side." Jesus is the one who prayed during their night voyage. Jesus is the one who came to them in the midst of the storm. Jesus is the one who reassured them saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Remember, it was Peter's idea to get out of the boat. Peter's the one who wanted to defy gravity and the laws of surface tension, the one who sought some spectacular proof of Jesus' identity, presence, and power. "Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Peter's words recall an earlier time and place – Jesus tempted by the devil in the wilderness. "If you are the Son of God ..." (Matthew 4:3,6). Peter's faith has taken him out of the boat and put God to the test.

I'm loathe to criticise Peter because I recognise myself in Peter, as one who wants to walk on water and escape the storms of my own life. I say this as one who's seen and heard many of you express that same desire. At some level, we've probably all lived with Peter's faith. We need to think about faith differently.

The disciples' voyage across the sea is a passage from one kind of faith to another. It's a movement from faith used to escape life's storms to a faith that carries us through them; from an external faith of physical presence and proof to an interior faith of spiritual presence; from a faith dependent on the circumstances of our life to one that experiences Christ's presence regardless of what's going on around us.

Jesus physically separated himself from the disciples and sent them on ahead but he never left them. Their faith and our faith must now be experienced as larger than Jesus' physical presence; not limited by the boundaries of what can be seen, heard, touched, or understood; independent of miracles that overcome the laws of nature. Jesus is taking us from a getting-out-of-the-boat kind of faith to a staying-in-the-boat kind of faith. This transition of faith happens in the dark night of our life, in the midst of life's storms. In every storm of life, we must decide whether to get out or stay in. Faith isn't a way to escape the winds and waves of life. Faith is the way through the storms of life. Sometimes faithfulness means staying in the boat and simply rowing.

Staying-in-the-boat-faith knows that Christ is always coming to us. We're never abandoned. There's no storm we go through in which Christ isn't with us. Staying-in-the-boat-faith never gives up because Christ never gives up on us. Every time we're caught in a storm, Jesus comes to us saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." He gets in the boat with us and calms our raging hearts.

Our walking on water isn't the miracle. The miracle is that Christ is stronger than any storm that comes our way. The miracle is that with Christ in the boat we pass through the storms of life to a new shore and a new life.

Are you afraid? I sure hope you are. I hope you and I are always afraid, afraid enough to take heart, to take heart again, and to never stop taking heart.

"Take heart, it is I," Jesus says. Hear his words again, expressed differently: "Be courageous, I AM."

Friends, may the wind of the Holy Spirit in the sails of the "Good Ship Jesus", steer you through the storms of this life and gently drift you in to the peaceful shores of the joy of our Father's salvation. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.