

Pastor Joe Polzin
 Matthew 14:22-33
 “Jesus Comes to Save”
 Year A – Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
 August 13, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today’s Gospel from Matthew chapter 14 follows on the heels of our Gospel from last week, where Jesus fed the five thousand in the desolate place. And we heard last Sunday how Jesus, who is God incarnate, cares for his people, and provides what they need in both body and soul. How Jesus still feeds us in the desolate places of our lives. Today we learn even more about this Jesus, who is God, and what this means in our lives.

So then, night had come, and our Gospel continues the account. Verse 22 – “Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.” We aren’t given the reason why Jesus does this, and the disciples may not have been given one either. What is clear, however, is that Jesus is the one who is directing the situation.

You may remember from last Sunday, that when evening came, the disciples wanted Jesus to dismiss the crowds. Let them go get food on their own in the towns. But Jesus was going to dismiss them on his own time. First, he would perform the miracle of the five loaves and two fish to show his great provision for the people. And then, only after he had cared for them, would he dismiss them. And so, at the outset of this passage, while the disciples are in a boat heading across the Sea of Galilee, we see Jesus doing just that.

Verse 23 – “And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.” Jesus’ ministry was one where he was always connected with his Father. The will of his Father and his own would always be, and still is, one. And he was about to demonstrate this fact to his disciples with what was going to take place next.

Our text continues, “When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea” (vv. 23-25). The disciples were experienced fishermen. They knew how to navigate a boat. In fact, despite the unfavorable conditions, they were able to make some headway, as they were a “long way” from the land.

But, the wind was against them. And as they struggled against the wind and the waves, something happened. Someone appeared. At the fourth watch, between 3 and 6 a.m., Jesus catches up to them, by walking on the water. And this in itself is a statement about Christ.

When God finally answers Job, in our Old Testament reading, after Job’s long suffering, and questioning of the God who would allow this in his life, God answers him. And He says, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... Who determined its measurements... Who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed’? ... Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or *walked in the recesses of the deep*?”

The point with Job was, no, he wasn’t there. Because he’s not God. He’s not the Creator. These are things only God has done. Only God has created the earth and its foundations. Only God has tamed the wild sea, set limits for it, and... even walks upon it. Jesus is proving himself

again to be God. He was there at Creation. He was there with Job. And now, with his disciples, he displays his power over creation and over the seas.

It adds even more depth to what the disciples would have been thinking as they respond in verse 26 – “But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, ‘It is a ghost!’ and they cried out in fear.”

Some may accidentally confuse or combine this account with Jesus calming the storm from the boat, which was back from Matthew 8, where the disciples, who were afraid for their lives because of the storm, cried out to Jesus. Here, in Matthew 14, their fear isn’t because of the wind or waves. They were doing okay there. But what does Scripture say causes their fear? The approach of the one on the water.

You know how your eyes play tricks on you in the dark? You think you see something, but you aren’t quite sure. I can only imagine what the disciples must have thought, when maybe the first disciple saw something that may have looked like the outline of a human coming towards them. But it was so faint, they wouldn’t have believed it. Plus it was late, after a long day, and they had been working hard in boat.

But as it got closer, they were more certain that whatever they saw, was really there. They were terrified, and believed it was a ghost, and cried out in fear. If someone or something was powerful enough to traverse the waters, without knowing who it was, the disciples had no way of knowing what this meant for their safety.

But to show the continuing care our Lord had for his disciples, look how perfect his response is. Verse 27 – “But immediately...” Immediately, not letting them wallow in fear, or taking his time to speak, but “immediately...” “Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’”

Notice something, notice what their reaction was, it was three-fold: 1) they were terrified, 2) they said it is a ghost, and 3) they cried out in fear. Now look at Jesus’ words, also three-fold: 1) they were terrified, he said, “Take heart,” 2) they thought it was a ghost, he said, “It is I,” 3) they cried out in fear, he said, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus responds to their terror with just the perfect consolation. Jesus’ words were there for them, showing his care and provision, and he comforts them. What Jesus says is perfectly enough for us. And it was for the disciples, right? Because the story ends there, correct?

No, and here, I’ll mention that what happens next so often gets talked about in a misguided way. I can’t tell you how many sermons or devotions I’ve heard or read that talk about what Peter decides to do next as a good thing. Amazing, yes. Bizarre, even. But good? Far from it.

Many say that Peter was demonstrating great faith in his Lord, that he would be willing to step out of the boat and come to Jesus. Many say that Peter is an example to us, that when the waves and winds are high in our lives, that we too should be willing to trust in our Lord, and “step out” in faith.

But I would say that’s not what Matthew is intending to tell us. It becomes pretty clear, that the Gospel-writer, Matthew, one of the twelve himself, has been depicting Jesus, who up to this point has been definitely shown, in both the feeding of the five thousand, and the walking on water, as the God of Israel and the Creator God, the God who loves and cares and provides for His people, and he’s contrasting that with the disciples, who continually underestimate and lack a full understanding of just who Jesus truly is.

Jesus’ words to his disciples are and should have been enough. But look at Peter, ever the boisterous disciple, look at his response in verse 28, “Lord, if it is you...” *If it is you.*

How many times in our lives, do we hear the comfort of the Word of God, but fail to take heed of it? How many times, does Christ assure us of his forgiveness, through his Word and Sacrament, but we fail to feel forgiven? How many times, does Christ assure us of his provision, but we spend time worrying about how we'll make it through the next day? How many times does Christ assure us of his control over all things in this world, yet we doubt and wonder where he is? "Lord, if it is you... if you were really in control... if you really had *my* best interests in mind... well then, I think *this* is what it would look like."

Peter's response is one we tend to have throughout our lives. And it's not a faithful response. It's one of doubt. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water," Peter says. He wanted a miracle for himself, to prove that Jesus is who he says he is. And the amazing part? Jesus says, "Come." Verse 29 – "So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus." Jesus shared with Peter part of his identity, his control over creation, so that Peter may know just who it is who speaks to him. And what happens next... Peter gets it now, right? All is good?

No, Peter's faith falters for a second time. When his eyes should have been on the one who graciously bid him to come, his eyes strayed to anywhere but. "[Peter] saw the wind, [I'm sure he felt the waves and] he was afraid, and beginning to sink..." he did the only thing he could do at that moment. "He cried out, 'Lord, save me.'"

Peter is like a petulant child who, facing a dangerous situation, disobeys his parent, pits his will against theirs, thinking he knows better, only to find himself in a worse situation than the start. And in sin and shame, the child has no option than to cry out to his parent for even more help. Peter's example here isn't one of faith. His example is of doubt and helplessness.

Doubting God's Word, not allowing Christ to reassure our guilt and our helplessness, only delivers us into a worse mess than where we began. We doubt God is truly in control, and we assert our own version of how we think things should go.

We're not getting the job we want? Time to take matters into our own hands. We don't have the kind of health we think we deserve from God? We're going to double down and insist from Him that He deliver the results from the doctors we desire. We don't have the type of companionship or family relationships we'd desire? Time to seek that fulfillment in unhealthy ways. We don't think God is able to forgive someone like me who is truly messed up on the inside? Time to try and work harder, proving to God by our actions we really deserve a little grace, all the while denying His free gift of grace.

Whatever the case may be, we are tempted to put God to the test, and the only result is to find ourselves in the same spot as Peter, and the same spot as Job. Appearing before the God of the universe, daring to insist that in some way that He answers to us. You heard God's answer to Job, out of the whirlwind. You saw Peter's result. Both ended up realizing their true standing before God, worthy of nothing, knowledgeable of nothing, and in immediate need of His saving hand.

Which is exactly what they received. Verse 31 of our Gospel, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?'" Just as Jesus responded immediately to the fearful disciples, Jesus responds immediately to the drowning Peter. And the answer to Jesus' question is evident in Peter himself; he doubted because he is sinful, and in need of saving.

Jesus brought Peter back into the boat, the wind ceased, and the disciples worshiped Jesus saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (v. 33). By demonstrating who he is and what he's come

to do, the disciples gained a glimpse, and a little bit more understanding, about the truth of this man, Jesus. That he is the Son of God, worthy of their worship.

And so, we, too may wonder, what will this Jesus do with us, in the times we demonstrate how little our faith is? How does the God of all Creation feel about me? And, when I find myself one day in front of the judgment throne of my Lord and King, how will he answer me when I can say nothing except, "Lord, save me!"

It's in God's Word that we find the answer. Jesus provides us his answer. That even in our times of little faith, that even in times when we doubt or falter or make a mess out of our lives, Jesus is here to forgive and to save us. What he did for Peter on the Sea of Galilee, he did for the whole world on the cross. And on the cross, he offered himself for all those, all of us, who have no ability to do anything except cry out to him for forgiveness and grace. And that's why he was there. To reach out his nail-pierced hand, and to save.

And when Jesus gave up his spirit and died, and all creation immediately reacted to the death of the Creator, the centurion and those who were keeping watch, just like the disciples, gained a glimpse, and a little bit more understanding, about the truth of Jesus. They said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54)

Today, I pray that you've gained a glimpse, and a little bit more understanding, that this Jesus who came to save, came for you. That he is the Son of God, worthy of your worship. In his name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.