

Sermon: Pentecost 11A 8/9/26

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Today's gospel story follows immediately on the heels of the feeding of five thousand. As it begins, Jesus makes...well, really, the word is **compels**...his disciples to get into a boat and head for the other side of the lake. Jesus doesn't go **with** them; he stays behind, first to dismiss the crowds who have just eaten their fill of the multiplied loaves, and then to head further up the mountain to pray. That was where Jesus **originally** planned to go, before his prayer retreat was interrupted by the arrival of crowds of people seeking healing. Now at last, Jesus was free to pray alone and undisturbed.

It was already late in the evening when the disciples set off in the boat. There were fishermen among them, who certainly were used to being at sea after dark. But then a storm came up, battering their small boat, bringing big waves and a strong wind that prevented them from getting to shore. There they were in the middle of the lake, somewhere between 3 and 6am, hours after they had left Jesus, and struggling just to stay afloat. There they were...with no other boats around and the One who had insisted – even **compelled** – them to go...nowhere near.

Suddenly they saw somethings, a human figure walking toward them on the water, and immediately they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they cried. But **just** as immediately, they heard a voice speaking to them, **Jesus'** voice, calling, "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid." In fact, the voice said, not just "It is I" – but the very words God gave Moses at the burning bush when Moses asked God's name: *ego eimi*: I am. So in the middle of Jesus' call to the disciples to have courage and not be afraid comes the identification that tells **why** they can feel encouraged and not afraid. Jesus identifies himself with God, with the One who created the world, the wind, and the waves, and who has power over chaos. Jesus comes in the way the prophets described **God** coming,

“trampling on the waves” (Habakkuk 3:15) and “walking in the recesses of the deep” (Job 3:16).

Then **Peter** spoke, and what happens next has been interpreted in **various** ways. In response to Jesus’ words, Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” But the words translated, “if it is you” can just as well be translated “**because** it is you.” If you accept the first translation, the “if” translation, Peter’s words become a test of Jesus’ identity and power. But if you accept the **second** translation, the “because” version, then Peter’s words show Peter trusting that Jesus’ word is empowering and gives us courage to risk doing something new...in **Peter’s** case, to come to Jesus on the water, to **walk** on water. **Whichever** one you choose, the truth is Jesus simply says, “Come.”

And Peter does. At Jesus’ command Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus...a walk of faith that continues until Peter takes his eyes off Jesus and focuses on the wind and the improbability of what he’s doing. Then he starts to sink. But **even then**, he cries out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” Even when he’s overwhelmed, he trusts that Jesus can help him. And Jesus does: immediately Jesus reaches out his hand and catches Peter.

Now come those words that many of us hear as Jesus rebuking Peter: “You have so little faith...why did you doubt?” But knowing Jesus, isn’t it **just** as likely that Jesus spoke these words lovingly and encouragingly, like a parent encouraging their child to take their first steps? Isn’t it possible Jesus was saying, “Peter, you were doing it! Why did you stop, why did you stop looking at me?” And then, both Jesus and Peter stepped into the boat, the wind ceased, and all **the** disciples worshipped Jesus as the Son of God.

That is the story Matthew gives us, but now we ask what is this story saying to **us**? What is its meaning for the Church...and especially for Peace Lutheran, today?

First, consider that this story falls smack in the middle of Matthew's gospel...right in the middle of a gospel that **begins** with the angel's announcement that the child Mary bears is Emmanuel, "God-with-us," and that **ends** with Jesus' promise to his disciples, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." From beginning to end and all throughout, Matthew proclaims that God is with us, always and everywhere. Coming as it does **before** Jesus is taken away to be crucified and buried, this story is meant to encourage disciples who feel abandoned and lost, lost and at sea without their Savior. Jesus, who proclaims "I am" and comes to them on the sea, is the assurance that his promises can be trusted, that no circumstance will ever leave us stranded without the One who **is** our Deliverance. Even when we find ourselves in predicaments and places we can't imagine God being, even in the darkness when we can't see any light at all, there – **exactly** there – we will find Jesus coming to us, to deliver us.

Secondly, the message of this story has often been reduced to either "**Step out** of the boat" or to "**Stay** in the boat!" But today God is saying that to settle on only one of these is to miss the depths of the story. To do that reduces it to a story with a moral, a "Do this" or "Don't do this" message, like an Aesop's fable. But God's word is **bigger** than that, more gracious, more complex.

The boat has long been a symbol of the Church. It's connected to the ark in which Noah and his family and the creatures survived the flood for 40 days and 40 nights. But today's story, about faith and life and Jesus, is both for those who **stay** in the boat **and** for those who **step out**. In fact, it tells us there is a time and a place for both. To stay in the boat can be an act of fear, a decision to play it safe, a refusal to trust God's promise to be with us and save us. But it can **also** be an act of faith, of believers faithfully rowing together in the direction Jesus commands, despite the obstacles. Yet to step out of the boat **also** can represent faith or refusal. It can mean taking a risk for the sake of the Gospel because we trust Jesus's empowering promise. Or it can be an

act of prideful independence, acting on our own because we are impatient with God, or because we trust our **own** instincts instead of **Jesus'**.

But what is true is always the same for those in the boat and those out of the boat: Jesus is with us, Jesus is for us, and Jesus will **continue** to come and save us from ourselves, whether from our lack of courage or from our foolishness. The life of faith is **always** arduous and risky and calls for both discipline and daring. So being obedient to Jesus' command to go and preach the Gospel and share worship in our beloved church with sacraments and preaching but **also** by stepping outside the church to reach people who don't easily step **in** or who haven't found a reason **yet** to trust that God loves **them**. For Peace, that could mean maintaining our rich Sunday worship and inviting people in the **usual** ways. But it could **also** mean new ways to invite and meet our neighbors, like our Friday night picnics, like inviting people to create art projects in the garden, like organizing postcard writing parties to encourage voting, or...**you** fill in the blanks. That's what this time with Pr. Diane, our interim pastor, and the special forums led by our Transition Team are providing: to consider who we've been and who we want to be, who we've expected to be part of Peace and who **God** is hoping we'll welcome, invite, and learn from.

Because the truth is, as the black Church often says, "We are all always either going into a storm, in a storm, or coming out of a storm." So we are called to step out in search of those who have no port in a storm, who don't feel God notices or cares about their difficulty or sorrow. And we need to be here when they step into the boat, whether gladly or fearfully, to welcome them and make room for them...because they come with Jesus. **No one** who steps inside our doors or reaches out to one of our members or our pastors comes alone. Jesus always comes with them. And who of us would want to miss welcoming Jesus?!

So, in the months and years to come, we need to keep the boat in good repair and practice the maneuvers that will make us ready to sail, but we will **also** need to be willing to step out of the boat and see where that takes us...to people Jesus is asking us to meet and welcome and care for. The life of faith is an adventure. But we **never** are without the One who stepped out into the sea of death for us, the One God reached out to raise from the tomb, the One who now is to be found here and everywhere, even where we least expect him, to love and deliver the world to the **other** side of this life, where God waits to welcome everyone home. This is the Good News. Amen.