

Sermon on Matthew 14:22-33
10th Sunday after Pentecost, August 9, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

While “surfing the web” recently, I came across a YouTube video which has gone viral. It’s about a man in Finland who walks up to a lake, steps out onto a dock, sheds his towels, and prepares to dive headfirst into the water, which lies perfectly still, like a sheet of glass, reflecting the forest around it. But instead of diving in, he breaks into a sprint, and runs across the water. The water is frozen into ice, which is why he didn’t fall in or even make a splash. It is a delightful surprise, once we fall for the illusion, expecting the lake to be simply water.

One of the most famous stories shared about Jesus was the time when Jesus walked on water, to meet his disciples in a storm, as they were out in a boat, terrified by the wind and waves. Now, everybody knows that no human being can walk on water, right? We humans know, through sad experience, that human beings will sink in water, and unless we can swim or are wearing a flotation device, we will drown. It’s pure science. We cannot walk on water. But in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 14, immediately following the story of Jesus’ greatest miracle – the feeding of more than 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish – we hear the story of Jesus walking on water, again, something no human is able to do. Thing is, impossible as we know this is, almost every human being knows this story about Jesus, and attribute this great wonder to him. There is even a saying for those rare persons who are able to do extraordinary, superhuman things – that this person “can walk on water”. Or we use this to refer to someone who has far too high an opinion of someone else, way beyond reason, when we say, “*he or she thinks that person walks on water.*”

But even though everyone knows the reference to the disciples story that they witnessed Jesus walking on water, this story isn’t *really* so much about *Jesus walking on water* as it is about Peter overcoming his fear of the wind and the waves around the boat, and at Jesus’ command, *walks on the water himself, keeping his eyes upon Jesus*. Until he doesn’t, and seeing again the great waves churned up by the wind, Peter falls in, and sinks beneath the waves. He is rescued by Jesus, who extends his hand, and pulls him up, out of the water. So this is really a story about faith and doubt, about trust in God when there is so much to fear in this life from the winds and waves of chaos and fear, until we focus our eyes on Jesus, who has power to walk even on those waves, to rescue us from our fears!

That, my friends, is an even better story than merely seeing Jesus walk on water!

Many of you know about the power of the wind and waves, if you've been out on the water much. I remember one time when my daughters were young girls, about ten or twelve years old, and I took Amy, Lori, and a friend Amanda to our lake place for an afternoon. They were playing in the water, and asked to take the row boat out. It is a really shallow lake near shore, and they were wearing life jackets, so I let them go. Well, the wind came up, and the waves drove them out deeper. They weren't very well trained at rowing a boat, so they kept rowing in circles, and going farther from shore. I started getting concerned, so I took out the canoe and a paddle to pursue them – not knowing what I would do once I got out there. After a long paddle, I came up beside them, but the wind kept blowing the boat in circles and it was too choppy for me to come close enough in my canoe – the wind made it hard for me, as one person in the back, to control the canoe. So I gave them a few vocal rowing lessons, and finally they got the hang of it, and started rowing together back to shore. They were fine. But I was not. The more I paddled, the farther away the wind blew me across the lake, past the island. But did I tell you the lake was shallow? Lucky for me, I blew close enough to shore that I could step out of the canoe. It was easier (and faster) to walk the canoe back along the shore, than to paddle. Though I didn't walk ON the water, I was definitely IN the water! Eventually I got back to our cabin – the girls beat me back. But we all learned an important lesson about the power of the wind and the waves on the lake, and our human limitations!

Some of you may have better stories about the power of the wind and the waves of the ocean, where countless ships have sunk in stormy seas and human lives have been lost. When I was in college, our choir went on a concert tour of Norway in 1975. Half of the tour was by boat, as we sailed on a small ship named *The Gideon* up the coast of Norway, from Trondheim up to Narvik and Bodo, north of the Arctic Circle, then back south again, to Bergen. We would steam into the fjords, dock at small towns, and give a concert in the local churches, then it was back on the boat for an overnight trip into the North Sea to the next fjord. Sounds exciting, but sometimes it was a bit harrowing for us “landlubber twenty-somethings”. I remember sleepless nights, when the waves literally tossed and turn us in our cabins, with my legs going over my head when the ship rolled one way, and my head going over my legs when it rolled the other. Sleep occurred in fitful naps, while some didn't sleep at all. On one particularly stormy night, I got out of my cabin to take a look, and saw two of the galley crew (a woman and a man) both crying in fear of the storm. My confidence shook, I went back into my cabin, not feeling very safe in my bed! Yes, that trip in the good ship *Gideon* was truly unforgettable! But I lived to tell the tale!

Perhaps this is a similar fear to that of the disciples in the boat that night. You see, they were supposed to be docked near shore, waiting for Jesus who was

up in the mountains praying by himself one evening. Jesus was really getting into the solitude, and praying longer than usual – in fact, he was up there all night! Problem was, the wind and the waves came up and blew them farther and farther from shore. Early the next morning, they were far out from shore, barely able to see land because of the waves. Then they saw what looked like a ghost to them – but it was Jesus, out taking a walk on the water. Besides being unbelievable, the disciples were overcome by their fear and terror of the storm, and now they had ghosts? But here's where the story takes a turn. Jesus called out and told them not to be afraid, for it was him, out on the water, not a ghost!

Peter was as afraid as any of them, but he was willing to take a risk. He called out to Jesus, and said he would come if he commanded him to (oh, please Lord, don't tell me!). So Jesus said, "Come". At first Peter kept his eyes on Jesus, and trusting that he was there, lo and behold, Peter walked on water, too! But once he noticed the strong wind and the height of the waves, he began to sink! He cried out to Jesus to save him, so Jesus stretched out his hand, took Peter's, and pulled him out. He was saved, but Jesus only shook his head, at Peter's lack of faith and loss of focus – but what had he expected? When they got back into the boat, the wind stopped and all was calm. And they worshipped Jesus as the Son of God.

This whole story is a metaphor, a symbol of our faith in God, through our doubts and fear, once the wind and the waves begin. The wind and waves are symbols of the chaos and fear which come into our lives so often, distracting us from our faith, turning our heads from trust in Jesus with the very real dangers around us. Even at our best, when we seek to hold to our faith in Jesus, we can be up and down just like Peter, and take our eyes off Jesus, distracted by the chaos and crisis which are so common – especially this year, in 2020!

These days we have a lot to be afraid of, for our health, for our livelihoods, for our communities, nation and world, not only from COVID-19! Just a few months ago we had been "sailing along" in our ship of faith, as individuals part of a Church, the Body of Christ, we said! Sure, we have had our challenges in recent years, but worship services have continued every Sunday for generations here, except for a few cancellations due to blizzards. But then, all of a sudden, COVID-19 entered like a sudden storm on the sea (even though we could see it coming on the horizon, like a storm cloud out of Europe and Asia). The wind and waves of the pandemic put a sudden stop to all human gatherings across the world. Suddenly there was no work, no school, no church "in-person" services, no sports, no social gatherings. Despite some saying "it's a hoax" or rumors of conspiracy theories spreading around, many today are hunkered down in fear of COVID. It is perfectly understandable, as we see how many have died or taken sick from COVID in this country. Many may be confused, wondering "*Where is God?*" If God can calm the seas, why is it still storming? If God is the ultimate healer, why

are so many catching this virus? There seems to be creeping chaos across this country which we had thought was secure and invincible, capable of handling any coronavirus that comes our way. We had this myth of American exceptionalism, which is now very much questioned, of medical care system and the leadership which has fallen far short of expectations. Now we worry about our older relatives and for school children and their teachers. There was another storm of rebellion in the streets after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, which has spread across the country and the world. Combine that with inept political leadership and continued partisanship, and you have a perfect storm in 2020. *What can we do? Where is God in all this? Is God even listening?*

Fortunately, in God's Word today we hear a word of encouragement. JESUS IS PRESENT and with us through the wind and waves, the chaos of protests, Covid, and political strife. We look for his presence now, and listen today for his voice above the din. We look to Jesus, who extends his hand to you and me. TRUST leads us to reach out and take that extended hand of our Lord. For only he can pull you and me out of the waters of our despair and fear, our loneliness and depression. Jesus promises to pull the whole church out, and invites all humanity to take his hand! How? By our obedience to his command to love one another, to care for each other, to repent and transform the Church and society into a Beloved Community of righteousness and peace.

Jesus invites you and me to come out of our fearful sense of security in our churches which have become our fortresses and homes that are castles of protection, even as we are careful now to remain separate physically from others while we seek to keep our health in this pandemic. But even as we continue to take care to observe the health precautions of wearing masks and avoiding crowds, Jesus invites us to DARE TO RISK seeing the Church – the Body of Christ – in a new way, with new people, new experiences and even new songs.

Jesus says to you and me, in the midst of the storm this year, that “I am here. Do not be afraid. Trust me. Take my hand. Live as I have called you to live. Love one another. Listen to and hear your neighbor's cries of suffering and injustice, the pain of those losing their jobs and their homes, bearing the burden of generations of injustice upon their backs.” Feed the hungry (we know how to do that!). Be patient. Listen for Jesus' voice in all that you hear, for the voice that will lead you to life.

Right now we seem to be floating helplessly in the midst of a churning sea – we don't know where we will end up. I don't know where we are going myself. But the promise of Jesus is the same as always, no matter the situation: “I am with you always, wherever you are, in the midst of the chaos, to the end of the age, when all will come clear. Take my hand – come to me – and I will give you rest, and an abundant life, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. See, I give you

bread in the wilderness, my hand in the churning waves. One day we will be like the disciples in their little boat. The sea will become calm, our fears will subside, and we will worship our Lord, the Son of God in calm seas forever. Amen.