

Matthew 14:22-33
"Keeping Focus"
Pentecost 11 (Proper 14A)

August 13, 2023
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When you hear the phrase "he walks on water" or "she walks on water," what comes to mind? Are you really thinking that he or she can actually physically walk on water? Most likely not. These days, that phrase "walks on water" usually invokes the idea that he or she is near perfect, or godlike.

Well, in case of Jesus, He's not near perfect, He is perfect. He's not godlike, He is fully and completely God in human flesh.

This morning's Gospel lesson isn't primarily about you or me, or about Peter who also walked on water. It's not about how we too can step out in faith and get out of the boat. It's not about our walk of faith. It's actually about Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus, the Creator who comes as the Redeemer of the world. It's about walking in trust in the One who walked on the water.

Now, this reading may be all about Jesus, but we are not left out. We are indeed included. I'll get to that later.

Just last week, we heard about the miracle feeding of the 5,000 men, plus the women and the children from just five loaves of bread and two fish, which after everyone ate their fill and were satisfied, they left behind 12 baskets full of the broken pieces. That was quite a miracle!

But before Jesus performed that miraculous feeding, do you recall what the disciples said to Jesus? They said, "***Send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves***" (Matthew 14:15). So, today, Jesus returns the favor as He sends away His disciples into a boat to go before Him to the other side of the sea, while He dismisses the crowds so that He could pray by Himself.

Oddly enough, the disciples never asked any questions, like "How are you going to get to the other side, Jesus?" We only hear that they left and Jesus remained to pray up on the mountain.

As Christ was praying, the disciples were having a difficult time coping with a contrary wind. First thing to note here is that these disciples were not afraid of this storm. You see, some of them were expert fishermen and capable sailors who had previously made a living on the Sea of Galilee. Yes, this sailing was difficult, but it wasn't imperiling. Sudden, violent storms were all too common on the Sea of Galilee.

But a storm is still a storm. It would have been much easier to cross the sea on calm waters than stormy waters. So, like the disciples, we too, would prefer calm waters. The same is the case in flying. If you had the choice between a shorter flight with extreme turbulence and the longer flight with calm air, which flight would you choose? I would choose the longer flight with calm air.

Storms do make a difference, but storms are nothing unexpected on the Sea of Galilee. Yes, the storm was unfavorable, but they were never in any danger of drowning.

As they were fighting the waves, during the fourth watch of the night, that is, between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., the disciples notice a shadowy figure off into the distance coming toward them. The storm didn't scare them, but now they are afraid!

The storm they can handle. That is known to them. What they can't handle is the unknown. As the shadowy figure comes closer, suddenly, they cry out, "***It is a ghost!***" (Matthew 14:26)

For these men, they thought this was it. If you or I were on that boat, I'm sure we would have thought the same. They thought they were goners. Could it be the Leviathan? For the Twelve, they were terrified. They believed that only a watery grave was their fate.

You see, Scripture often portrays the sea as a realm of chaos that opposes God's order. In Isaiah 27, the sea is said to be the dwelling place of the ancient serpent – the Leviathan – who is God's enemy.

So, what does Jesus' walking on water mean for us? Well, first there is fear. Yes, Jesus is shadowy until He is fully seen. That is scary. But there is even more to this fear. You see, whenever the Lord shows His glory, this invokes fear. Man is incapable of walking on water. Man is just too heavy. So, Jesus is more than just a man. This indicates that Jesus has mastery over nature. He is in fact, the Creator of heaven and earth. As the Creator, He is not subject to space and time. He is the Lord of creation, so He has to power to dominate His creation.

But there is even more. Remember the Leviathan? Well, Jesus' walking on water may indicate something more. Though Him walking on water, He ***"treads the waves of the sea"*** (Job 9:8). Because of the association of the sea with the devil, this could also indicate that Jesus' walking on water not only demonstrates His divinity, but also His conquest over the evil foe. So, Christ comes not only to still life's tempests, but also to crush the power of the devil underfoot.

But this lesson doesn't just end with Jesus' walking on water. In their fear, He calms them saying, ***"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid"*** (Matthew 14:27). There, Christ used His divine name, ***"I am."***

As the disciples have been calmed by Jesus' words, Peter appears as if he wasn't sure this man is Jesus. So, in typical Peter fashion, he cries out to Jesus, ***"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water"*** (Matthew 14:28). So, Jesus invites Peter saying, ***"Come."***

So, keeping his eyes on Jesus, Peter begins walking on the water toward Jesus. Then Jesus who has control over the wind and the sea began to test Peter by showing him a strong wind. All of a sudden, Peter begins to focus on the wind rather than on Jesus. He was distracted. He had lost hold of that word of Christ that He had spoken – "Come." Instead, Peter was focusing on the wind and the water. He was realizing that he was walking on water. Now, he was sinking.

How often do you get distracted away from Christ? We live in a constantly distracting world. Emails, texts, notifications, and phone calls were supposed to make life simpler, but so often it makes life more distracting. We get distracted by so many shiny objects. And it is so hard to get back to being focused on the task at hand. In fact, studies show it takes 23 minutes to get refocused.

So, the eye always impedes hearing. For Peter, as long as he was hearing ***"come"*** and he did not look at the water beneath him, he was fine. But all at once when he began to take notice of the wind, he was distracted and right then and there, he lost his hearing of the word ***"come."*** At that point, he begins to sink and goes under. Faith certainly starts out with strength, but it is made weak by the opposition of the wind.

The opposition of the wind for you and me is the world we live in. Satan is the prince of this fallen world. He is out to distract us from Jesus, so we would join him.

You see, Satan wants us to follow our wants and our desires, rather than to hear Christ's unchanging and saving Word. But what Satan never expects is what Peter cries out as he sinks, "***Lord, save me!***" (Matthew 14:30)

You see, "***everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved***" (Romans 10:13) and "***if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved***" (Romans 10:9). So, what happens to Peter? Jesus immediately reaches out His hand and took hold of him.

Remember earlier when I said that we are also included in this lesson? It's subtle, but Peter's distraction serves us as an illustration of the struggles we all face daily as Christians. We are, by nature, of the world, and we live simultaneously as saints and sinners, trusting and doubting accordingly. In our lives, we face continual struggles with the devil, the world, and our flesh. We see the troublesome seeds of doubt in our various vocations of life, whether we are husband or wife, parent or child, employer or employee.

But there is a solution to our fears, struggles, and doubts! We can join Peter by calling upon the name of the Lord! We may lose our focus, but Jesus always maintains His focus. Jesus was sent to save sinners. He was sent to save you and me! As the Creator and our Redeemer, He accomplished our salvation by enduring the cross and rising victorious. He defeated our evil foes and gave all who trust in Him His victory!

To this day, Jesus continues to call us as He says "***Come***" through His Word and Sacraments, bringing the joyful message, "***It is I.***" This strengthens us in our weak faith, frees us from our fears and doubts, and moves us to joyful service in His kingdom.

We, too, confess with Christ's disciples, "***Truly you are the Son of God***" (Matthew 14:33), who delivers us from the devil and eternal death, as well as from the myriad of storms in this life. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +