

Written Copy: Matthew 14:25-33 “O Me of Little Faith”

11th Sunday @ Pentecost, Proper 14

Sunday, August 13th, 2023

Text: Matthew 14:25-33

²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 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. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “**Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.**” ²⁸ And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

The text’s intent

Jesus uses this miracle to demonstrate that He is in control of all things for the benefit of His disciples and all who would come after them. He arranges for them to be out in the middle of the lake, for the storm to come and violently attack the boat. And in their struggles, He comes to them, showing that He is the God in human flesh who is master over the elements, even stormy wind driven waves. When they cry out in fear, thinking He is a ghost He calls out to them, revealing Himself and commanding them to have courage and stop being afraid. This works well enough to move Peter to say, “Lord, if it is really you, command me to come to you.” It is Jesus, and He does work to strengthen Peter and the disciples’ wavering faith by commanding him, “Come!” By the power of faith in Jesus’ word of command Peter gets out of the boat and actually does walk to Jesus. But then doubt sets in when He looks instead to the power of the wind and away from Jesus and begins to sink. But Jesus is right there, with hand extended, to pull him back up from sinking and save him. Jesus gently admonishes Peter saying, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” They climb into the boat and the wind and waves cease. The disciples get on their knees and worship Jesus, confessing, “Most certainly, You are the Son of God!”

Focus Statement:

Jesus is God in human flesh who comes to us when we are struggling with the issues of everyday life. He comes with His word of testimony that He is the Creator and Savior God, for whom nothing is impossible. He comes to create faith where there formerly was none, so that we believe and trust that His death and resurrection make us children of the Heavenly Father. He calls to us through His words of Scripture to have courage, He is with us, stop being afraid. And then when fear and doubt threaten to sink us He grabs hold of us through the means of grace and saves us from losing faith, and instead strengthening our faith in Him as the Son of God, our Lord and Savior.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

During times of struggle, stress, and fear even the most mature Christians can have doubts about God’s presence and His ability to protect, care, and save them. When the wind and waves of this broken world batter us, we can cry out in doubt as well.

What the hearer should do as a result:

As did the disciples hear and meditate on His words that reveal Him as our mighty Creator, Savior, and protector. Meditate on the ways He has come to us in the past in our struggles, and how He reaches out with His mighty hand through the means of grace to save us from sinking into unbelief.

Subject Sentence: Jesus comes to me when faith is weak to strengthen.

Introduction:

“O you of little faith!” Words directed at the favorite whipping boy of the disciples, Peter. Peter who, after being given the revelation that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God” then proceeds to tell Jesus He is wrong about being arrested, suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, and being put to death. He admonishes Jesus by saying, “No Master! See You are the Messiah! Messiah doesn’t get arrested and tortured and die! Messiah defeats the enemies and rules once again on the throne of David. Peter is so wrong about this that Jesus responds, “Get behind me Satan!” meaning “Peter, your speaking for the devil and his desires, not the will and plan of God that I am telling you!” **O Peter! You of little faith!**

Peter, who on the night Jesus would be betrayed would boldly say, “Even if everyone else abandons you, I will not.” To which Jesus corrects him by prophesying “Before the rooster crows three times you will deny you even know me.” Flash forward to Jesus being questioned and the house of the high priest and Peter fulfilling Jesus prophetic word, and then rushing out into the night weeping over what he had just done. **O Peter! You of little faith!**

And here we have another shining moment in the life of Peter the disciple. Peter is actually walking on the water! He’s doing it, until he no longer is, and begins to sink. **“O Peter! You of little faith! Why did you doubt?”**

Of course, Jesus could direct that statement toward us too; couldn’t He? Peter began to sink when he took his eyes off Jesus and instead focused on the strength of the wind and its effect on the water. Jesus could ask that question of us during the various times in our life when what is going on around us moves us to take our eyes off Jesus too. Some take their eyes off Jesus when times are going well, thinking I’ll call you when I need you. Some when the activities and pressures of our life move us to give Jesus a backseat, forgoing worship, Bible Study, Devotional Prayer time. And then the unexpected happens and our weakened faith falters. Would Jesus be saying to us **O you of little faith! Why do you doubt?”**

Faltering faith can affect not just those who have given Jesus the backseat in life. It can happen to the mature and active Christian too. We might like to see ourselves like **Moses at the Red Sea**, lifting his staff in confident faith as the waters of the Red Sea part. Or even **Job** from our Old Testament Lesson who, when sickness, loss, and the death of loved ones struck him was able to give his remarkable testament of faith: “**The LORD gives, the LORD takes away, blessed be the name of the LORD.**” But when the problems and stresses of life lived in a sinful fallen world, surrounded by sinful fallen people, in bodies that suffer through sickness and injury, as loved ones grow sick and even die, all the while we constantly battle that sinful fallen nature of ours, we can find Moses’ confidence and Job’s faithful witness lacking in ourselves. Maybe we can say it with our mouths, but it falls short of being confidently held in our hearts. We of mature faith can begin to doubt too, wondering, “Where are You Lord? Why did you let this happen?”

The Revelation of Jesus in Our Gospel Lesson

Since this can be any one of us, Jesus has an important revelation about Himself for us in our Gospel Lesson.

First thing to notice is how Jesus is in control of all things from the start. This happens right after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 when these disciples wanted to send the crowd away because they didn’t believe Jesus could solve the problem of satisfying all of them. Only when Jesus has revealed Himself as the Lord God who miraculously provides all that is needed for His people does He then dismiss the crowds. And then He compels His disciples to leave as well because they have a date with destiny, in the form of a storm on the Sea of Galilee. One has to wonder just how He was able to convince these disciples to leave without Him, not knowing how He was going to meet up with them. But Jesus does get them in the boat and out into the lake because He is in control of all things.

And out there in the middle of the Sea of Galilee they find themselves struggling to stay on course and move ahead. The wind and waves are battering their boat mercilessly. While they are not scared at this point since they are experienced fishermen and had more than likely encountered such conditions before, they are becoming worn and weary from the struggle. It’s the early morning hours, 3:00 AM or later, and they’ve been toiling and struggling for hours without much headway to show for it.

And then out of the storm, walking on the top of these violent battering waves, comes a figure walking toward them. There is no way any man could be doing this! They’re struggling inside the boat; how could any man remain upright and above water in this storm? How could any man be walking on top of the water to begin with. They are shocked and confused at this sight. The explanation they come up with is this is no man, but a ghost in the form of a man. This would fit Jewish myths and wives’ tales that the depths of the sea was the resting place for souls of the departed. The disciples respond by crying out in fear.

But as soon as they cry out in fear Jesus responds with words of faith and assurance. **“It’s okay! Take heart! Have courage! It is I Myself, Jesus! Stop being afraid!”** Now if these were the words of any ordinary man they might fall on deaf ears. But these are the words of the Creator God who has taken on human flesh. Here is the very God who could answer those questions posed to Job in our Old Testament Lesson: He knows the foundations of the earth, the very depth of the deepest seas, the One who set the boundary of sea and land, the very One who created the water. He is above and over the natural laws and elements because He is the One who created them and can bypass them as He wishes. And out of a love that is even more miraculous than His walking on water, this Creator God comes to His children when they are in trouble with words of faith and encouragement. His words do more than inform, they actually give the courage and strength of faith He commands them to have.

And it works, to a point. The disciples stop crying out. And Peter, who perhaps speaks for the rest, has a glimmer of strengthened faith. He says to Jesus, “Lord, I want to believe it’s you, but I’m struggling with this. This isn’t anything I’ve ever seen before. If it is really you, command me to come to You on the water, because if it really is You, I know that You can make me do that.” Jesus answers Peter’s prayer for assurance and strength of faith in Him by giving the command, **“Come!”** And Peter does.

And behold, Peter is actually doing it. Not that Peter had the ability in and of himself. It was the word of command of Jesus, the Creator God, who enabled him to do this. Imagine what it would be like, in the midst of the wind and waves of a storm, to be walking on the water like Jesus. Peter continues to walk toward Jesus until he takes his eyes off of Him. At that point he turns his focus to the strength of the wind blowing and the waves battering. He begins to think, “I can’t really be doing this am I?” He forgets that it is the strength and power of Jesus doing this, and Peter’s faith falters, and he begins to sink.

After all that has happened, and all that Peter has seen, not just now, but the miraculous feeding, the healing and casting out demons, not to mention a time before when Jesus with a word calmed the wind and waves of a storm that threatened to capsize their boat; after all this, you might think his doubt earned for him a grave in the depths of the sea. But not according to Jesus. Peter cries out “Lord! Save me!” and immediately Jesus is there, reaching out His hand, and pulling Peter back up out of the water. Jesus, who is in complete control, called Peter out of the boat not so that he would drown in unbelief, but so that He might see and know Jesus in a new way. That he might know and believe in Jesus as the Almighty Creating God who comes to save and rescue his children, even when they don’t deserve it.

Christ Comes to Call, Save, and Strengthen Faith

It's the reason this Creator God came to earth and took on human flesh in the first place: to save His fallen, faithless creation. Our doubt and faithless acts earn for us something worse than drowning in the sea: separation from our Creating and Sustaining God now and for eternity. But Jesus came to prevent that from ever happening. His suffering and death on the cross was necessary so that He might be your atoning sacrifice that forgives all your sins, your doubts, and the guilt. He came and took your place and rose again so that you might know the price to save you has been paid, your debt is cleared, you have been declared to be right with God in His eyes, because all that would declare you to be otherwise has been removed by Jesus forever.

This wonderful gift of grace is given to you by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel message preached and the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. All that Christ earned for you in His life, death, and resurrection has been laid in your lap, along with the strength to hold fast to it as your own personal truth which is His gift of faith. That faith itself is supernatural. It's not something you can conjure up or learn on your own. It's the gracious gift of Christ, His gift of love, given to you.

The Spirit Ministering to "You of Little Faith"

And Jesus doesn't just give you this gift and take off, leaving you to struggle through the storms and buffeting winds that mark our life lives in this fallen world. Jesus, who is in control of all things is at work to keep that faith alive and active and growing throughout all your struggles. Notice Jesus didn't say to Peter, "***O you who have NO faith!***" Peter had faith; it was weak and struggling, but it was there. Jesus used this miracle to strengthen not just Peter's faith, but the rest of His disciples too. That can be seen as they fall down on their knees and worship Him; the One who, as soon as they climbed back into the boat, made the wind and the waves cease. He is the Creator God who is in control of all things, and uses all things according to His purposes, even when it seems like our faith is being stretched to the limit. His Spirit is working on us and in us just as He was on Peter and the disciples.

He was at work as the Kuehl family, and I, gathered around Betty as she was about to meet Jesus. It was not an easy thing for me. I had prayed days before that He would heal her and restore her to health, and that hadn't happened, at least not according to my timetable and my idea of how it should happen. I also prayed that if He was not going to restore her that He would quickly take her so that she didn't have to suffer, but instead she hung on. There were times I personally felt pretty useless as a Pastor. But then I realized I myself brought nothing to the table to help, it was all the Spirit working through me and through the words of Scripture I read and the liturgical prayers we prayed. He worked through the rite of The Commendation of the Dying, which includes Confession and Absolution, pleas for God to be gracious and merciful to Betty and her loved ones, and reminder after reminder that by faith in Christ we all stand forgiven, made good enough to have His Spirit abide in us now and are made ready for eternal life to come. And I noticed a peace come over me, and not just me, but all of us. It was a peace worked by the Holy Spirit as He used these means to strengthen our faith. It was the assurance that Betty was on her way to be with Jesus, and that we would see her again on the Last Day. So that when she did take her last breath, while there was sorrow and sadness, it was tempered with that peace and hope that passes all understanding, focusing on the promise of the resurrection. It's the promise that Betty held onto by faith unto the end. Jesus was using this experience to strengthen faith in all of us as we watched her go. We knew who she was going to meet, and where she will be on the Last Day, and that we, by that same faith, would be right by her side.

Conclusion

In our lives lived out in faith we might like to pretend we can face any and all problems and dangers like Moses with his staff raised over the Red Sea, believing by faith that God would part the waters so Israel could escape. We might try to be like Job when we are faced with loss and voice a great statement of faith like "The LORD gives and the LORD takes away, blessed be the name of the LORD." But there will come times when you and I are like Peter: ***"O us of little faith! Why do we doubt!"*** We should remember that Jesus didn't say to Peter: "O you of no faith!" but "You of little faith". Even a little faith can do wonderous things in the hands of the Holy Spirit, like allow "Little Faith Peter" to walk on water. Jesus had taught earlier that His reign and rule in our hearts is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds planted in the garden which grows into a tree that can become a home for many birds. The Holy Spirit is at work in you and in me, through all the troubles and hard times, through all those things that batter us like wind driven waves, so that we keep our focus on Jesus. He assures us that none of those things we suffer through are punishment, because Christ took all our punishment for sin. But in the hands of Jesus, who controls all things, they serve to be the means to grow our faith and increase our hope in Him of life with Him now, and life eternal to come. And in the midst of all these things, our Creator, Sustainer, Saving Lord gives to us His peace which passes all understanding. May that peace rule in your hearts this day, and all your days, until Jesus comes to take you home to be with Him forever. Amen