



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094
(920)261-2570
www.goodshepherdwi.org

NINTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST August 10, 2014

“That Sinking Feeling”

(Matthew 14:22-33)

Rev. David K. Groth

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was a long way^a from the land,^b beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. 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,^c 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." (Matthew 14:22-33)

Collect of the Day

Almighty and most merciful God, preserve us from all harm and danger that we, being ready in both body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish what You want done; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

In Matthew, Jesus has just fed the crowd of thousands with a boy's lunch: five little loaves of bread and two fish. There were enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets. John reports that same crowd of 5,000 men (not including women and children) was so affected by the miracle that they were plotting to take Jesus by force and make him their king and carry him into Jerusalem. Surely the disciples would have delighted in such a plan, anticipating their role as his inner circle, his privileged cabinet. But they have to know it wouldn't be so easy as marching into Jerusalem with Jesus on their shoulders shouting "For he's a jolly good fellow" and "Long live the king!" No, there would have been some kind of blood bath, because Herod (who thought he was king in those parts) would have objected. And Pontius Pilate (the Roman Governor, the real boss in town), he also would have objected and called in the troops to put those rebels down like rabid dogs. Fortunately for those five thousand men Jesus wasn't interested in being king of some backwater territory of the Roman Empire. He's far more interested in dying on a cross for the sins of the world, past, present and future.

So what does Jesus do? First he tells his disciples to get back in their little boat and head to the other side of the lake. He'll meet them there. Then Jesus dismisses the crowd as well, telling them it's late and time to go home. To punctuate this command, he turns his back on them all and hikes up into the mountains so that he can be alone in prayer.

Time passes. When we catch up to the disciples, it's about 3 or 4am. The Sea of Galilee is about eight miles wide by thirteen miles long. John says they were about three or four miles out from shore, which means they're somewhere in the middle of the lake. There are hills and ridges on either side of the Sea of Galilee, and

sometimes these have a way of focusing and amplifying the wind, so that the waves can be kicked up pretty good, especially from the perspective of a small boat.

This is exactly what happens. The wind picks up. The boat begins to heave and pitch. The disciples take in the sail and take up the oars. Conditions rapidly deteriorate. Matthew says the boat and those in it were being beaten by the waves. In the Greek, it's the same root word for torture. The disciples are not really intent on making progress anymore. They're just trying to ride out the storm, trying to hold the boat straight against the wind to keep it from being swamped. They're exhausted and anxious.

That's when the miracle happens. Matthew reports it in the most restrained manner. "He came to them, walking on the sea." Of course it's absolutely unreasonable and illogical. It's absurd. Things like that don't happen. But if you allow for the possibility of God, you must also allow for the possibility of the miraculous. It's hard to imagine Jesus walking up and over the waves. Could it be that part of the miracle was that the water was made level right around Jesus' feet? (I remember one of my professors saying, "Curious questions deserve no answer.") In any event, the wind is howling, the waves are lashing at the boat, but somehow he's not being pitched about or tossed around, and somehow the water beneath his feet has become so dense that it actually supports his weight.

Now, picture yourself out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. You're in a small boat during a big storm in the middle of the night, when suddenly you spot a man walking towards you on water. I suspect you too would be terrified. I suspect your rational brain would also give way to old superstitions, and you too would conclude it's some kind of ghost, maybe someone who drowned and is haunting those waters. I suspect you too would assume this cannot be good news, and that you and your little boat are doomed. You too would cry out in fear for your life. That's where the disciples are. But our text says, "Immediately, Jesus spoke to them saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

We can always count on an interesting reaction from

Peter. And sure enough, he does not disappoint. In an instant he moves from superstitious terror to the daring of faith. Seeing that Jesus is walking on water and making it look so easy, Peter gets it into his head that he might be able to do the same. Maybe he's embarrassed by his fear and now wants to express his faith; maybe he wants to make up for his cowardice with a show of courage. In any case, Peter says, "Lord, command me to come to you on the water" to which Jesus simply says "Come!"

So Peter climbs over the side of the boat and walks, actually walks on the water toward Jesus. Again, if you allow for the possibility of God, you must allow for the possibility, at least, of the miraculous. Peter takes a few tentative steps toward Jesus, but then he takes his eyes off Jesus, and looks at what the wind is doing to those dark waves. Fear overtakes him. Peter starts to sink and cries out, "Lord, save me." Without hesitation, Jesus reaches out and takes hold of Peter. But then he rebukes Peter. "You of little faith" he says. "Why did you doubt?" Peter thought he had strong faith, but clearly it was not as robust as Jesus thought it should be. Peter was never in danger; the Lord was right there. But his faith gave way to fear. He looked at the wind and the waves and forgot Jesus.

We know how that happens, don't we? We know how that works. We know the promises of the Lord. We know his power. We see it all around us in his creation. And we believe he loves us. One glance at that cross reminds us of the same. We know he is always with us and we are his baptized, redeemed children, so we're never really in danger. We are ultimately safe. But then fear arises. Maybe your job doesn't feel secure. Maybe you are about to outlive your savings. Maybe you're really sick. Fear arises and it's a bully. It demands your attention night and day, and gets in your face and pushes you around. It refuses to just go away and leave you alone. And what happens to us is what happened to his first disciples. We look at the wind and the waves in our lives, and we forget Jesus. Instead of holding on to our faith, at least for a moment, we let go of it. And we

get that sinking feeling. But that's not what Jesus wants for us. Fear is one of the things Jesus came to save us from.

Ken Klaus, the former Lutheran Hour Speaker, quoted a man who grew up in a primitive village in an isolated rain forest in South America. Translated, the young man said, "It used to be, when I was living in the jungle without Jesus, we never knew a day without fear. When we woke up in the morning, we were afraid. When we went out of our houses, we were afraid. When we walked along the river, we were afraid. We saw an evil spirit in every stone and tree and waterfall. We saw evil spirits inside of us. When night fell, fear came into our huts and stayed with us all night long." He continued. "But when Jesus came, the fear was gone. When Jesus came, we had hope and we could rest because we knew He had changed our world. We still were surrounded by the jungle, but we had Jesus" (*Daily Devotion*, Oct. 6, 2012).

That's what God intends for us. We live in a different kind of jungle, but one that can still be full of fear. Fear of global warming, of random violence, of nuclear terrorism . . . fear of Ebola, fear of personal failure, fear of death. Sometimes our fears can be irrational, the fear of swimming in dark water, or the dread fear of that spider in the corner of the bedroom.

Atheists love to talk about how irrational Christians are, and if only people moved away from faith toward reason we would all be the better for it. But did you hear about that study published by Baylor University. Entitled, "What Americans Really Believe" one of the things it reveals is that atheists are more likely to harbor irrational fears than are Christians. Atheists are also more likely to believe in the efficacy of palm readers and the usefulness of astrology. They are more likely than us to believe places can be haunted, and are more likely to believe Bigfoot exists. Conversely, active membership in a conservative Christian church has a powerful, negative effect on all those beliefs. So look who's being irrational now! A rule of thumb: when you believe nothing, you're more likely to believe anything.

It's true.

For a moment at least, it's as if Peter has no faith at all because all he sees and all he can think about are those ominous dark waves. The Good News here is that Jesus overrides that weak and fearful faith, and still saves Peter. He reaches out with a strong arm and grasps the hand of his fearful disciple with weak faith. Peter's fear and doubt do not nullify the Lord's love for him, nor his authority over the wind and the waves. This miracle is a visual confirmation of 2 Timothy 2:13, "If we are faithless, he remains faithful." What a comfort! The Lord does not want you to be full of fears and doubts, but even when you are, he still loves you and is still near you and ready to save. Like Peter, your faith can probably swing wildly depending on the circumstances. Your faith can swing between cowardice and courage. Yet his faithfulness to you does not swing erratically. This text teaches he still loves you in spite of your doubts and fears and still saves in spite of weak faith.

What a comfort! Maybe you've launched the children. They have jobs and homes and perhaps their own families. But somewhere along the way, they forgot Jesus and it breaks your heart. But I'm here to tell you Jesus has not forgotten them. Maybe they care nothing about their baptisms. But Jesus remembers the baptismal promises he made. Maybe they hardly think about God, but he cannot stop thinking about them. Maybe they're smart and well educated, but still harbor some surprisingly irrational fears. Please know his love for them is also irrational, and that he will do at least as much as he has promised for them . . . and for you.

I think Peter learned something about himself that day, his doubts, his fears, his faith. More importantly, I think he learned something about the love of God in Christ Jesus who was strong to save in spite of Peter's doubts and fears. Peter failed to hold on to his faith, but Jesus did not fail to hold on to Peter. Paul warns we don't want to be infants in the faith, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Eph.

4:14). And James writes, “The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” (1:6). But Peter would remember for the rest of his life that there is one who is strong to save, in spite of the waves, and in spite of the doubts and fears and weak faith. Amen.

