

Matthew 14:22-33

Pentecost 10 + Proper 14A + August 15, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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It's a bit of a change from the usual for tonight's sermon. You might know that I spent last week in the Dominican Republic, where I had the honor of presenting to our missionaries stationed in Latin America, the Caribbean and Spain, along with their spouses. Along with those presentations, I also had the privilege of preaching on tonight's Gospel lesson.

So tonight, I'm preaching the same sermon to you. I haven't changed it a bit. For one thing, I think that you might find it interesting to hear the sort of stuff that pastors preach to other professional church workers. For another, I think you'll find that, except for a couple references to mission work, the message is the same for you.

So here we go.

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In the name of Jesus.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus gives all sorts of gifts to Peter. Before we get to the really good ones, we'll note that He also gives Peter the opportunity to walk on water. He can do this, because He's the Son of God in human flesh. He has authority over all creation. If Jesus wills to walk on water, He walks on water. If He wills Peter to walk on water, He speaks His Word. By His Word, He gives Peter the authority to walk on water too.

So Peter walks on waves, according to Jesus' Word and will. But then he sees the wind and the waves, and he starts to trust their ability to kill him over Jesus' authority to preserve His life. The wind and waves are false gods of fear, with no power to save: and they reward Peter's fear by letting him sink.

This is where we get to the better gifts that Jesus gives. He preserves Peter's faith, though it be buffeted by the storm, so that Peter cries out his Kyrie, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus preserves Peter's life, takes hold of him and gets him to the boat.

Let's not overlook this gift either: the words that Jesus has already spoken to all the disciples remain for Peter too: "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

It's true in the darkness of that night. It's always true for His people.

Much later on, like all people, Peter will sink into the grave. The Lord will raise him up, even from the dead.

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The great temptation with this text is to turn it into allegory, and then into bad allegory. In other words, since you and I don't usually face the prospect of having to walk on water, the preacher is tempted to pontificate about the "storms of life." That's when the allegory happens. It gets far worse when the preacher goes on to say something like, "When you're enduring the storms of life, just keep your eyes on Jesus and keep walking on those waves until you make it to Him, and you're going to be okay."

Let's not go that route. Instead, I would point you to something you said at the start of the service. Our liturgist said, "Our help is in the name of the Lord," and you responded, "who made heaven and earth."

This was followed up by one of the most delightfully outrageous exchanges in the liturgy, where the liturgist began it by saying, "I said, 'I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord.'" Now, for any sensible person who knows how the law and the world work, the proper response is, "Are you crazy?" As in, "Do you really want to go before the Lord of heaven and earth, who judges and condemns the wicked, and start spewing out a list of how much you deserve His wrath? Do you really want to poke the Lion with a sharp stick?" After all, if you're applying for a job, you don't start out your résumé by listing your failures and crimes. This isn't about mere employment. This is about salvation.

But the response isn't by way of the law. It's by way of the gospel. "I said, 'I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and You forgave the iniquity of my sins.'" Are you crazy to confess your sins to the Lord? If so, you're crazy like a penitent David.

With that in mind, rejoice most of all in this text that the One who calms the storm and saves Peter is the One who forgives your sins.

Remember: there are, I would say, three reasons why Jesus performs miracles on His way to the cross. One is to present His credentials: as He makes the blind see, the deaf hear and the lame leap for joy, He's fulfilling prophecy about the Messiah and proving Himself to be the Christ. Another is that He's also giving you a foretaste of the Last Day, when He raises up His people fully healed and fully restored – Garden-of-Eden good, better than they ever have been.

And then there's the third reason for miracles, and He makes it clear when He forgives the sins of the paralytic lowered through the roof in Capernaum. Jesus performs miracles to demonstrate that He has the authority to forgive sins.

It's no different with this miracle, is it? As Jesus rescues Peter and calms the storm, He demonstrates that He rules over all creation. The sea is His, and He made it, and He has authority to say, "Thus far shall you come and no further, and here shall your proud waves be stayed." This storm in the text is creation groaning in futility as it awaits the revealing of the sons of God in Christ. On His way to the cross, Jesus settles the storm; and the Christ-caused calm that follows gives you a foretaste of the Last Day when creation is at peace, released from its bondage to corruption.

By His Word and presence there, Jesus saves Peter and silences the fury of the storm. He restores order. By His Word and presence, He forgives your sins, strengthens and preserves you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. Forgiveness and life are a far greater miracle than walking a few feet on the surface of the ocean, because nobody ever walked across the sea into eternal life.

Here's the good news: your help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. It's true about the forgiveness of your sins; and if it's true about forgiveness, then it is true of all else too.

To put the good news in the language of our gospel reading, the Lord of heaven and earth says to you (to *you!*), "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." He uses different words to say it. Once He said, "I baptize you," and He washed you with water and His Word. Now He says, "I forgive you." Soon He says, "Take and eat, this is My body; take and drink, this is My blood for the forgiveness of sins." The same body and blood that walked on water to rescue Peter, is given to you for your salvation.

And because "they" cannot believe in Him whom they've never heard (as our epistle says), He puts His Word into the mouths of His own and sends them out. He blesses you with beautiful feet to

match tongues that confess, with the promise that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Here's the bad news. The Lord also rightly says to you what He said to Peter: "Oh you of little faith, why do you doubt?"

You do doubt. In this dying world where you're both saint and sinner, faith and doubt go together. It can be no other way. What with the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh, your faith will be far from perfect. You'll doubt the efficacy of God's Word and start to believe you have a hand in making it work better. You'll doubt your calling and whether or not you're a proper instrument in the Lord's hand. You'll wonder at times if the Lord is still paying attention; and if you get hammered hard enough, you'll start to wonder if the Lord is out to get you.

Don't fool yourself: one of the reasons for gathering for regular worship, conversation and even this conference is because we are all that weak and curved in on ourselves. We can all be battered into doubt and despair. And where there is doubt, fear follows: fear perhaps that we have lost favor with God, fear perhaps that God is not faithful, or fear that our faith is too little. We all need to hear the Word from others outside of us. And we are all given to bear the burdens of those around us.

Then, of course, you'll be tempted to solve this problem yourself. You, doubt? You're better than that, right? You're in professional church work, for crying out loud. You just need to buckle down and soldier on until the doubts go away again. You say this with confidence, knowing that when Peter – also a professional church worker of some note – started to sink beneath the waves, he declared, "I just need to swim harder, and it will all be okay."

No, wait. He didn't say that. By grace, he said, "Lord, save me." The Lord took hold and got him to the boat. He didn't abandon Peter because of his doubts and little faith. He saved him. He forgave his doubts, strengthened his faith and delivered him from fear.

The Lord does not abandon you because of your doubts and fears. He does not demand that you strengthen your faith to a certain level before He's willing to help. He's died for your doubts and fears too; so rather than try to power through them, confess them. Confess them to the One who has died and is risen, and be forgiven and strengthened in faith unto life everlasting.

For with every proclamation of the Word and with every Holy Supper, the true Son of God – and the Lord of heaven and earth – is present with grace. Bearing forgiveness and life, He says to you, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

In the name of Jesus. Amen