

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 9, 2020
Matthew 14:22-33

“Do Not Be Afraid”

We saw once again the power of wind and wave this past week with Hurricane Isaias churning up the east coast. Although we did experience some wind and rain here in our own area, we were largely spared the terrible devastation that such a storm can leave in its wake. And for this, we give thanks and praise to the Lord, even as we remember in prayer the many people and places who suffered great loss. It goes without saying that all of this is compounded by COVID-19 restrictions already in place. May the Lord God have mercy on all those whose homes and livelihoods have been impacted or destroyed, and may all of us look to what we can do to provide help and support not only through our prayers, but through financial contributions and donations as well. It is not a storm per se that we read about in today's Gospel lesson, but there is still danger out on the open water of the Sea of Galilee. Battered by the winds and waves, in the darkness of night, Jesus came to the disciples and met them where they were with these blessed words: **“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid”** (Matthew 14:27). Jesus' words serve as the basis for today's sermon under the theme: “Do Not Be Afraid.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

Today's Gospel lesson picks up where we left off last Sunday (Matthew 14:13-21). Having fed the crowds with five loaves and two fish, having dismissed the 5000+ people and sent them on their way, Jesus retreats for personal quiet time and prayer. And in doing so, Jesus sets the example for us today. We all have busy days where we just seem to be going from one thing to another. We need to do this, and we have to do that, and so on. We meet ourselves coming and going. And sometimes it's not just one day, but an extended period of time. How do we get through that? If Jesus himself needed quiet time apart to be with his heavenly Father, how much more for you and me today! That is where strength and blessing are to be found: in that quiet time with our heavenly Father. To be in his Word where He speaks to us, and then in response to what He has said to us we speak to him our prayers, praises, and thanksgivings, this is to be well-grounded in faith and life so that with God's help we are able to endure the storms of life.

Time-wise in the Gospel lesson, it's very early morning between 3-6AM, which would have been the fourth watch of the night The Romans designated four night watches: 6-9PM was the first watch; 9PM-12AM was the second watch; 12-3AM was the third watch; and 3-6PM was the fourth watch. No doubt the disciples were beyond tired after a very long day. We are told that they were **“a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them”** (Matthew 14:24). The original language here is a little more specific. They were “many *stadiou* (σταδίου) from the land.” *Stadiou* is the plural for *stadion*, where we get our word stadium. It's a unit of measure – 607 feet, or about one-eighth of a mile. This means that the disciples' boat was way out there on the water, and they were struggling. No outboard motor to rely on; just rowing hard against wind and wave, making little, if any, headway. In their weakness and weariness, the Lord Jesus comes to them in a very surprising and unexpected way: walking on the water. Wouldn't we freak out if we saw something like this in the middle of the night out on the open water? We absolutely would! We would be crazy with fear and dread, just like the disciples were. But this is no ghost. This is Jesus, Son of God and Son of man, who is Lord of heaven and earth, at whose word the forces of nature, demons, and death itself must submit. In our own lives, when we've been rowing hard against the circumstances of life and feel like we are making little if any headway, in our weakness and weariness, Jesus comes to us also. He comes not to condemn: “Try harder! Put your backs into it! Pain is gain!” Jesus comes not to condemn, but to save. He comes with words of blessing: **“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid”** (Matthew 14:27).

Peter becomes a spokesperson for all of the disciples – and for us, too – as he calls out: **“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water”** (Matthew 14:28). But as Peter finds out, as we all find out, **“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”** (Matthew 26:41b). Jesus invites Peter to take that bold step of faith and come to him, walking on the water as He himself is walking on the water. Impossible as this seems, contrary to the laws of nature, Peter walks to Jesus on the water. How do we explain this? We cannot explain this from a scientific perspective, but only from a faith perspective which is able to transcend what seems impossible. But then Peter is suddenly overcome by fear as he looks around and he starts to sink. Isn't that true for us as well? We want to believe and we do believe, but we are earth-bound mortals, subject to fear, sin, and death. Despite our best intentions, we shift our focus away from Jesus to the circumstances around us. We no longer see Jesus; we see only the winds and waves that are going to pull us down and destroy us. As Peter cried out, we also cry out with that simple but profound prayer: **“Lord, save me!”** (Matthew 14:30). When we feel like we are going down in the midst of all that is swirling around us – situations and circumstances that are bent on our destruction – that is our prayer. **“Lord, save me!”** Immediately, Jesus stretched out his hand and rescued Peter, but he also challenged Peter: **“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”** (Matthew 14:31). Like Peter, we, too, are of little faith; we, too, doubt. This side of heaven, our trust and belief in Jesus are imperfect and flawed at best. Thanks be to God, Jesus did not push Peter away for his lack of faith, and neither does Jesus push us away for our lack of faith. As the Word of the Lord reminds us: **“A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench”** (Isaiah 42:3). We are that bruised reed; we are that faintly burning wick. But the Lord is not finished with us yet. His Word and Sacrament strengthen and sustain us to grow continually in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).

Peter's cry to Jesus, **“Lord, save me!”**, helps us to understand that Jesus is exactly who and what the angel told Joseph before Jesus was even born. In the night while he slept, an angel of the Lord came to Joseph as he deliberated on what to do now that he had found out Mary, his betrothed wife, was pregnant, and he was not the father. **“But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”** (Matthew 1:20b-21). That is what Jesus' very Name – *Yeshua* – means, “He saves.” That's really important for us to remember and hold onto: Jesus saves. Jesus has saved us from the triple threat of sin, death, and hell through his life-giving death upon the cross. Jesus has opened the kingdom of heaven to everyone who puts their trust in him. He promises to be with us always, even in the midst of the storms of life, even to the end of the world (Matthew 28:20). This means that our future is secure, come what may. May this lead us to do as those first disciples did there in the boat with Jesus: worship him, saying not only with our lips but with our very lives: **“Truly, you are the Son of God”** (Matthew 14:33). May God make it so for Jesus' sake. Amen.