

Sunday: Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: August 9, 2020

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Title: Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

Doubts arise in every human life. We can experience it in a number of ways. Difficult decisions can lead us to doubt our chosen path when things do not go quite the way we thought they would. People who study human behavior point to the concept of buyer's remorse, when a purchase is made then the questioning as to the choice and the need arise. Listening to the thoughts of "so-called experts" today lead us to doubt their opinions and theories. The pandemic and the multitude of proposals to stem the tide of infection cause us to doubt that anyone who claims science to back them up is to be trusted. Many people seek to cast doubt on the history that has been recorded over the years and taught to us in school. The attacks on certainty even extend to the existence of God and the fulfillment of the promises of old for the salvation of the world. The old evil foe is a master at creating doubt about our salvation.

We are not alone in this regard. Thomas doubted the resurrection of Jesus. In Mark 9 the father of a demon possessed boy responds to Jesus' statement, "All things are possible for one who believes" saying, "I believe, help my unbelief." And today we encounter the disciples who had just witnessed a day of miraculous healings, and the feeding of over 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, doubting Jesus and his divine nature.

Matthew 14:22-33, our Gospel reading for today, presents us with another miracle of Jesus. In this miracle account, Jesus walks on water, calls Peter out of the boat to join him, rescues him from the result of his doubts and calms the sea.

After feeding the 5,000, Jesus sent the disciples across the Sea of Galilee while he dismissed the crowds. Finally, he was able to seek out his Father in prayer, which is what he set out to do that morning. After sharing his grief with the Father, Jesus leaves his place of prayer in the desolate place. He then heads directly toward the disciples who have been rowing the boat for hours. We are told it was the fourth watch, which translates to somewhere between 3 and 6 a.m. The

wind was blowing, and waves were roiling the surface of the Sea of Galilee. Tired from a long day with the crowds on the shore of the Sea and having served the crowd of over 5,000 bread and fish, they were pressing onward, still a ways to go before they could rest. As they look back, they see a startling sight. There is a human figure walking on the water toward them. Fear grips the band of brothers. Terrified, the disciples cry out, “φαντασμά ἐστίν!” “A ghost! It is”

As the terrified disciples huddle in the boat, Jesus comes closer and says to them “It is I.” “Stop being afraid.” Not totally reassured, Peter says, if it is you, Lord, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus replies “Come.”

Peter gets out of the boat walks a few paces and then becomes afraid due to the wind and the waves, and he begins to sink. Terror overwhelms him. This time not at the idea of a ghost, but at the prospect of sinking into the inky sea and death. Calling out to Jesus for salvation he says, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately took hold of him and saved him. As they got into the boat the wind and waves subsided and the group continued their journey, heading toward Gennesaret.

This is the second time we have encountered the disciples in fear for their lives on the Sea of Galilee. In the events of Matthew 8 the disciples were afraid of the storm or the waves as they cross the Sea. While the wind and the waves were tormenting the boat in our passage today, the disciples know what they are doing, and in fact, have progressed a good distance across the lake. They were not fearful of the weather. Something else is the point of this miracle account. Their problems here are caused when they are confronted by the true identity of Jesus. They don't know that Jesus is a man who is also, at the same time mysteriously God.

Our Gospel today is not about the storm, it is about faith. More specifically, faith in Jesus. In line with our Lutheran understanding as to the answer to every question, we ask the question this morning, what is this miracle text about? It is about “Jesus.” We will see this in greater depth as we explore this miracle further.

Peter, often the voice of the disciples, typically appears as a bold spokesman for the twelve. He speaks when others are silent, giving voice to their combined thoughts and concerns. Having recovered from the doubts and terror experienced when the disciples first saw Jesus walking on the sea, Peter, brashly, tells Jesus to “command” him to get out of the boat and come to him. Which Jesus does.

Peter gets out of the boat, trusting Jesus, taking our Lord at his word. He is fine as long as he keeps his eyes on the Savior. Standing within arm's reach of Jesus Peter's focus is drawn to the wind and the waves. Instead of keeping his eyes on Jesus, his vision is diverted to the scary world around him. His trust in Jesus draining from his body, he sinks. Overwhelmed by concerns for his mortality, he recalls the command of Jesus to come to him, Peter cries out to Jesus, "save me." Jesus reaches out and lifts Peter from the water grave he is sinking into. Jesus met Peter's need to be saved from death in the water. Peter's dilemma was not caused by anything other than his doubts.

Doubting Peter came up short in the faith department twice today in our text. First, Peter doubted whether it really was Jesus? After Jesus had identified himself saying "It is I" Peter responds, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come on the waters to you." The second doubt came even after Peter had gotten what he asked for and had experienced a stunning supernatural event. Through all of this the question arises, "What did Peter doubt?" What was it that he questioned in his mind as the events unfolded?"

Was there ever a man less deserving of rescue than Peter? There is nothing admirable in his example, nothing bold about his desire to get out of the boat. We may not know the thought processes of Peter, but one thing is certain, he should have believed Jesus the first time, and he should have believed Jesus the second time as well. The powerful, divine figure who is able to walk on water, who is master over the storm and sea, is the Lord who had spoken courage to the disciples, revealing his identity; he had invited them to stop being afraid (14:27). We see Peter, sinking below the water, afraid just as he and his fellows had already been afraid, crying out as he and his fellows had already cried out. Peter's faith is not being held up as an example to emulate. His weakness is being showcased, in order that, in direct contrast, Jesus' identity and power and grace might be seen more fully.

Was there ever a Master more patient and gracious than this Jesus, whose power and authority go out to all who call upon him in their need—even when they themselves have created their fatal situation of need? Our text today highlights the identity and power and the saving purpose of Jesus.

Over the years many have pointed to Peter as an example. Many point to his faith as he gets out of the boat. Peter is an example, but not in the way many would like to portray him. Jesus speaks to Peter, in a mild rebuke, "O Little faith,

why did you doubt?” Peter is a sign of weakness to highlight the true nature of Christ as true man and true God. Peter demonstrates the weakness of man and humanity’s broken nature.

Peter is an example for sure. An example of life as a Christian. Try as hard as we might to resist it, we still doubt. When assured of who Jesus is, we doubt that he is willing and able to do what he says he will do. Satan constantly sows seeds of doubt into our lives causing us to doubt like Peter.

Every day we are confronted with situations that cause us to doubt. The culture around us attacks the faith that we have and seeks to undermine our trust in God. We are challenged by those who seek to rewrite the narrative of history in ways that eliminate God and minimize the importance of our churches as representatives of God’s love and mercy in the world.

Each of us have fears to address in our lives. What is it that causes fear in your heart? Is it our economy that is struggling under the weight of slowdowns caused by government response to the pandemic? Is it that many people, including ourselves and our friends, are suffering economic challenges? Is it the unemployment rates are at unbelievable levels that causes doubts about the future for our children? Is it that stores are unable to keep shelves stocked with merchandise as manufacturers are have slowed down production? Is it that what we now find in stores costs more than it used to?

Are you concerned by the protests that keep disrupting life in cities big and small across the country? Protests that turn violent have turned lives up-side-down as nefarious individuals see these protests as a means to cause damage and undermine our governments and rain destruction on our communities.

Maybe the restrictions on personal liberty imposed on us by our elected leaders leave you wondering if God is really in charge. With our courts eroding the protections guaranteed by the Constitution of our country we may worry about the ability of our churches to continue to reach out to the world. Limits on speech imposed on individuals, coupled with mandates to accept lifestyles that are contrary to God’s Word and our beliefs, we can begin to question the ability of God to keep protecting us.

Into all of our concerns our text today speaks words of comfort, “Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.” Jesus who is able to walk on water, is able to care for you and me. Jesus responds to our fears the same way he responded to the disciples.

He reaches out and lifts us as we sink in the turbulent waters of the world of today. Jesus calls us to come to him knowing that we will sink when we worry about the waves we face in the culture wars of today. In our doubts we forget the promise of Jesus when he says, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18).

To strengthen us and prepare us for the world around us and the challenges to our faith, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to build faith in our hearts. In Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit creates faith in us and throughout our lives he continues to nurture that faith. Along with the Spirit, Jesus does not leave us alone. He comes to us in the words of Holy Scripture. He is with us as we gather together in His name. He watches over us and protects us, often from ourselves and the situations we put ourselves in.

When we fail. When we fall short. When we sink in the inky, black waters of sin and doubt, crying out “Lord, save me” Jesus is there to grab our hand and pull us into the boat with him. He does not issue a blistering rebuke for our lack of a strong faith. Instead he gently speaks to us as he did to Peter, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” As we seek restoration and strengthening of our faith, Jesus gives us his body and blood to build us up. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we receive the forgiveness of our sins, including the sin of doubt, and are cleansed of all unrighteousness. As Christ gives himself to us, the wind and the waves calm. In Christ there is peace. In Christ there is redemption. In Christ there is power. Power to overcome the attacks of the evil one and his minions. The power of Christ strengthens us as we grow in faith and resist the seeds of doubt sown in the wheat field of our faith community.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.