

Sermons from West Denmark



West Denmark Lutheran Church Luck, Wisconsin westdenmark.org

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

The day before Jesus walks on water, he gets the news that John the Baptist has lost his head. His response is to get into a boat, to withdraw from the crowds to be by himself. John was his cousin, remember—the news of his death must have stung. However, the crowds aren't interested in Jesus' grief; watching him get into the boat they just follow him along the shore; when he disembarks in what should have been a desolate place, thousands of needy people are already there, waiting for him. I imagine Jesus standing undecided for a moment, a foot still in the boat and a foot in the shallows; he could have gone back aboard to find a quieter place, but his compassion

for them outweighs his need for solitude. He gets out of the boat, goes to the people and heals their sick, and when they get hungry, he feeds them.

So today we pick up the story after the people have eaten. The way John's gospel tells it, the crowd is so enthused about this healer who can also feed thousands with a handful of bread and fish, that they want to make him king on the spot. Matthew doesn't talk about this; what he says is that immediately afterwards Jesus compels the disciples to get back in the boat. The word *compel* is a forceful one—he practically shoves them aboard, hurries them away; he tells them to get out of there, to leave him, to not just jog along the shore this time but put the whole Sea of Galilee between themselves and the crowds. Maybe he knows they would all too willingly be in cahoots with the king-makers, or maybe he knows what lies in store for them on the lake.

It's getting later by now—in the dwindling daylight it's not hard for Jesus to dismiss the crowds, and now he's finally alone after a long, trying day—he has the solitude he's been craving since morning. There's just enough light for him to climb a mountain, and there, Matthew stresses his solitude twice: "He went up by himself to pray. When evening came, he was alone there."

Meanwhile the disciples are in their boat, and the water's getting rough. The Sea of Galilee is about 4-5 miles wide, and they're right in the middle of it, land far in every direction, the wind against them, and the waves, it says, torturing them. They've been in the boat since evening, fighting the storm, and they've quit worrying about the damage done to their boat and started fearing for their lives. It's now between 3 and 6 am, and they're exhausted from fighting the storm all that time.

If you're up for a little Biblical, nautical whiplash, it's interesting to note that it was at this same time of the morning that God saved the Israelites from the Egyptians by the Red Sea. All night, it says, God caused the wind to blow, dividing the waters into two walls on either side of a dry path for the Israelites to cross. And in the morning watch, in the wee hours, God returned the waters to their place, over the heads of all the chariot drivers pursuing them. When morning dawned, the water, having swallowed the Egyptians, was calm again and the Israelites were safe on the other side.

I don't know about you, but the morning watch, the last watch of the night, the wee hours, for me, those are the worry hours, when in the quiet and the dark all the monsters that seem so manageable during the rational light of day grow large and take on flesh and blood and whiskers and fangs and tower menacingly over me.

So it feels important that in the last bleak, dark hours before dawn, when the charioteers are riding the heels of the last Israelites, God shows up, decisively. And it's no accident that in the last watch of the night, when on the Sea of Galilee the disciples nearly give up hope, Jesus comes to them.

I imagine from his perch on the mountain Jesus had been watching the cloud gather over the lake, seen the storm break, calculated the levels of the disciples' desperation and exhaustion, and sensed their need for him. I guess he could have just appeared in the boat—no slave of physics, Jesus—spontaneous appearance was in his wheelhouse, but he chose to come to them in the most ordinary way—how else should he come to them except to walk?—except for it being extraordinary.

That Jesus should walk on the water—we know the story, we've heard it since Sunday School—we forget that this was in nobody's realm of possibility but God's. In fact, it was God's signature move. In Genesis, the Creator hovered over the waters. Job names God as the one "who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea." And God would reply to Job, "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recess of the deep?" The Psalmist writes of God: "Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen." By walking on the water, Jesus is making literal the poetry of the ancient writers. He's doing the thing that only God can do.

The disciples are afraid—squinting through the storm they can only imagine it's a ghost, but Jesus' words reach them through the storm: "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Those same words we hear so often from God, especially when God greets humankind—do not be afraid, take heart.

"It is I," he says. We could hear in this sentence an ordinary statement of being, but we could also hear in it an echo of that great name of God, the one God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush. "I AM WHO I AM."

"Take heart. I AM," Jesus says. He's claiming with his words what he has just claimed with his body on the water. You saw me walk where no mortal walks. Now I claim the holy, unspeakable name of the God of the ancients.

What kind of a name for a god is I AM?

When God introduces themselves to Moses at the burning bush, God says, "I am the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the god of Jacob." Moses hears lowercase "god," wants to know exactly which god it was the forefathers worshiped—was it Ra, the Egyptian sun god, Baal, the Canaanite god, some fertility or agricultural god? Which god are we talking about here? God gives no name: I AM WHO I AM, a remarkably unpromising name for humanity who always wants to know what a god can do for them; this is a God beyond names, beyond humanity, beyond culture and story. God says, "I existed before you and without you, I have no need of your worship or recognition." Humans would name this God many other names, all of which speak of what God offers them: Creator, Sustainer, Father, Comforter, Great Physician. But the name Jesus claims on the water is the old name, the one beyond relationship, beyond humanity. This is the God Jesus is identifying with. "Take heart, I AM."

It is the eternal, unknowable God who approaches them on foot through the storm, yet a God who shrugged off holy distance in favor of relationship, who grieves the loss of his cousin, who understands their need for him in the darkness, in the storm, a God who wants to be with them.

Peter, who knows what possesses him, wants to get out of the boat. Maybe he's the inkblot test of the Gospels, where our own motivations illuminate what could have been his. For me, today, I wonder if for the rest of the disciples the storm has been enough, but Peter has not yet been brought to the end of his rope. He still possesses enough of himself to want to experience the ego rush of the miraculous. So it's the idol of himself that shoves him over the gunwale, with no small degree of faith to buoy him, getting him to within arm's length of Jesus, when suddenly he reaches the end of himself. In that moment, as he begins to sink, and calls out, "Lord, save me!" I believe he passes the test. Realizing he brings nothing to the situation, he calls out to his Savior. Jesus names it "little faith" but that's all he needs, enough to recognize his need, enough to know that Jesus would save him, enough to call on him. Little faith, after all, is the beginning of bigger faith. Jesus wastes no time. He grabs him, hauls him up out of the water, and they walk together back to the boat, arm in arm, on the tempestuous sea.

Once they climb back inside the boat, the water calms immediately; the disciples' ears ring with the sudden silence after the storm and they hear the thin silence that is God's presence among them. The infinite, eternal I AM stands in the boat dripping.

The disciples, awestruck, have to state the obvious: "Truly you are the Son of God," but we'll hear this confession one more time in the Gospel of Matthew. The centurion at the foot of the cross, hearing Jesus' cry at his death, feeling the earth shake in the eerie darkness, will say the same. The footsteps of Jesus through the water, his dogged pursuit of us, would lead him all the way to the cross.

The beauty of the darkness before dawn, the blessing of storms, of coming to the end of ourselves, is that these are the places where we can know most tangibly just how fragile the idol of ourselves really is. And as the idol that is our ego, our pride, quavers and fails, this is the time we can most expect God to show up. A God whose footprints through the water we don't see, whose voice sometimes sounds like thin, still silence, but a God whose love drove them to shake off the holy mantle of distance and come to us in the flesh, come all the way to the cross. We need only enough faith in this God to call out, "Lord, save me," to come to the end of the idol of ourselves and grasp the solid hand of God. Just a little faith, and that's enough. Less of me, more of you—let that be our prayer.