

**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**

**9 August 2020**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

Many of you know this joke already, but here we go anyway. There once was a priest, a minister, and a rabbi fishing in a boat together. One day, the priest said, "I'm thirsty," and stepped out of the boat. He then walked on water and took a drink from a booth on the beach. The next day, the minister said, "I'm thirsty," and stepped out of the boat. He then walked on water and also took a drink from a booth on the beach. On the third day, the rabbi said, "I'm thirsty." But as soon as he stepped out of the boat, he drowned. The minister looked at the priest and said, "Think we should have told him where the rocks were?"

Today we are presented with a fascinating passage. Let me set the stage for you. John the Baptist has just been killed. Jesus tried once before to be alone by himself to grieve over John and to pray, but the crowds gave chase from all the villages and Jesus felt compassion for them. He cured their sick and fed the multitudes, as we heard last week. After the crowds are finally gone, Jesus sends his disciples across the Sea of Galilee to Gentile territory and finally begins a time of quiet prayer and conversation with God. But soon, this quiet time of prayer is interrupted once more as Jesus comes to the rescue of his terrified disciples, who are about to succumb to the rough seas.

Jesus walks on the waters and the scared disciples exclaim, "It is a ghost!" to which Jesus said "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then, according to Mark and John, Jesus enters the boat and the seas are calmed. Matthew is the only one who adds an additional element to the story. Peter tells Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus allows Peter to do this, but Peter "became frightened and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'" Which, as we heard, Jesus did, after calling him a person of "little faith."

Peter's request starts with the words, "If it is really you, let me walk on water" sounds almost like one of the temptations in the desert at the beginnings of Jesus ministry. The enemy says, "If you are really the Son of God..." Jesus calls Peter a person of "little faith" and I agree. But I don't believe it is the fear and the sinking that shows Peter's little faith. It was rather his doubt that Jesus was actually walking on water, that Jesus was among them, and that Jesus was Lord over the elements that shows his little faith. It was his desire to get out of the boat that shows Peter's little faith.

I believe Matthew remembers the added detail of Peter's interaction with Jesus and Jesus' rebuke for a very specific reason. Throughout Holy Scripture rough seas have

come to mean danger, chaos, un-creation, conflict, and even death. As Eugene Boring states in his book *Matthew*, “The sea itself in biblical thought connotes the forces of chaos, held at bay in the creative act of God, but always threatening (Gen 1:1-10; 7:11; Pss 18:15-16; 69:1-3; 107:23-32; 144:5-8.) To the biblical mind, being on the sea is itself a threat, representing all the anxieties and dark powers that threaten the goodness of the created order. To be at sea evokes images of death, the active power that threatens the goodness of life.” The Bible is clear that God is Lord over the seas and he alone walks on the waters (Job 9:8; 38:16; Ps 77:19; Isa 43:16; 51:9-10; Hab 3:5; Sirach 24:5-6.)

Matthew’s community is engulfed by the rough seas of the persecution that started soon after Nero’s burning of Rome, which the Emperor had blamed on the Christians. By the year 80, when it is believed the book was finished, the persecutions had already cost many Christian lives, including the lives of many of the Apostles. Many of the community may be doubting Christ’s presence in their lives. Matthew wants to encourage his congregation to faithfulness by reminding them that Christ is among them. Even if they don’t see him clearly, he is among them. He walks alongside them and knows their fears, their afflictions, their pain, and their tribulation. Christ is the God with us, and as long as the Church has her eyes on Jesus at all times it will be safe. It is when the church looks at other sources of authority that she falters in her faith and begins to drown.

My friends, this passage is very significant for our Church today. The Church is the boat God sends into the world to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And, as the disciples encountered rough seas, and as Matthew’s community was dealing with rough seas, so our church today has unique challenges that we must deal with. These challenges may be internal divisions and conflicts, the ever advancing threat of secularism, the persecution of Christians in many areas of the world, a lack of direction and clear mission in many parts of the West, our sense of complacency and apathy towards the needs of others, the abandonment of Holy Scripture as our rule of life, just to mention a few.

Regardless of the challenge, however, Matthew reminds us that if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus there is no conflict the church can not overcome, no struggle that we can not win, and no threat that has the power to destroy us. Christ is Lord over the rough seas of COVID-19 and, even though we don’t see it yet, in him we are victorious. In him the church is able to reach her destination and become a blessing to those to whom Christ has sent us. Without him we are in peril, we remain anxious, and we lose our way.

Not only is this a parable for the Church, but it is also a parable for us. Many of us have lost our hope as we are confronted with the rough seas of this Pandemic, or we encounter marital discord, conflict with others, or financial problems. We see the seas raging all about us and we despair. We fail to see Christ walking on the water alongside us. We fail to see that he is present and that he loves us and cares for us.

My friends, the only way we can find the purpose we seek is to invite Jesus into the boat. The only way we can find peace and relevance is if we fix our eyes on him and follow his lead. Even when everything seems lost, he is with you and with me. Have hope, Christ is among us, and with him on our side we are victors and conquerors.

Let us pray,

Dear God, thank you for giving us your Son to walk alongside us as we face the rough waters of this Pandemic with all the unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and despair it has brought into our lives. Gives us faith to believe that Jesus is among us. Give us courage to keep our gaze fixed on him who is our Savior and our only hope. We ask you this in his holy name. Amen!