

“TRUST IN THE GOD WHO SAVES”

Matthew 14:22-33

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

August 13, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 14, verses 22 through 33. It is on page 692 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, we get a picture of Jesus’ mighty power and what he does with that power. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Matthew 14, we begin reading at verse 22.

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

²⁸ And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

What if we find it hard to trust sometimes? What if it’s hard to have faith? What if we often feel like Jesus’ words, “O you of little faith,” could be applied to us? Will I still be saved? Will this little faith endure through all the storms of life? Will it actually last until my final breath? Or is it so weak that it will give out before my body does? Will God still hear me and save me if I have doubts when I call upon his name?

To answer these questions, we’re going to consider this account of Jesus walking on water and then Peter also walking on water—well, sort of. And I want us to think about this question together: *What really matters: the strength of your faith, or the One you have faith in?*

We hear a lot about faith these days—and not just from Christian circles or from other religious folks. We hear the word *faith* all over the place. *You just gotta have faith, man. You gotta believe in something.* The world teaches us to believe in ourselves. It’s kind of cliché after sporting events when the sideline reporter is interviewing the player of the game for the winning team and asks them how they won the game. And they might say something like, “We just had faith and believed in ourselves.” Yeah, well, the other team believed in themselves too, but they lost. Maybe we should go ask the losing team about their faith. I’m kind of waiting for

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an honest athlete to just say, “We won because we’re better than the other guys.” It sounds kind of arrogant, but it’s usually true.

And the world even has tolerance for religious faith too, so long as we don’t equate it with reality. Most people—even if they don’t agree with another person’s religious beliefs—still see value in some kind of belief system—something that gives meaning to our lives. But the question is rarely asked, “Is it true?”

We look at all the religions in the world, and they all make contradictory truth claims, and plain logic tells us they can’t all be true. But instead of actually investigating them to see if one of them might be true, we kind of just throw up our hands and say, “There’s probably a little bit of truth in all of them, but we can’t really know, so it probably doesn’t even matter.” But what if it does matter? What if one of them is actually true? What if there is actually a trustworthy God who can actually be known?

The Letter to the Hebrews defines faith as, “The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). So, at least in the Christian faith, we trust in things we don’t see. We trust a God who is invisible to us. And we trust him to give us something we have never experienced. But faith is not a blind leap. It’s not irrational. Our faith is based on real historical events with evidence and eyewitnesses. The historicity of our truth claims is what makes our faith effective.

The critical event that determines whether the Christian faith is true or false is the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, everyone in the world should be a Christian. But if he did not—if he was crucified, simply to lie in a tomb and rot—nobody should be a Christian.

If we trust in something real and dependable, our faith is effective even when it feels weak. But if we trust in something false, it doesn’t really matter how much confidence we have. That faith will fail us, because the effectiveness of faith does not depend on the strength of our faith; it all depends on the strength and goodness of the One we trust in.

So imagine you’re out walking on water. The easiest way for us to do this—of course—is to wait until February when the water is frozen. If you are out on a frozen lake, you are trusting that ice to hold you up. You have no choice; you have to trust the ice. But the level of confidence you have in that ice is basically irrelevant. The only thing that actually matters is the strength of the ice. If you have 100% confidence in one inch of ice, you are going to be in a frigid world of trouble. All the faith in the world will not save you if you are trusting in something unreliable. But, on the other hand, if all you have 1% confidence in a hundred inches of ice, you’re going to be safe. You might be nervous the entire fishing trip, but you’re also going to be dry and safe. And that’s what really matters. So it’s not the strength of your faith that really matters; it’s the strength and goodness of the One you trust in.

And this is what we learn when Peter walks on water, but then begins to sink.

This is a miracle Jesus demonstrated only to his disciples. It comes right after the feeding of the five thousand (14:13-21). Jesus sent his disciples in the boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Then he sent the crowds back to their homes, and he went up on a mountain to pray by himself. Meanwhile, the disciples were working hard to get across the lake, because the wind was against them.

We sometimes confuse this miracle with the earlier miracle of Jesus calming the storm (8:23:27). In that miracle, Jesus was already with the disciples in the boat; he was just sleeping. And on that occasion the storm actually posed a threat to their lives. They thought they were going to perish on the sea. But this one isn't even called a storm. There was simply a strong wind against them, and they had to work hard. They weren't actually afraid until they saw Jesus walking on the water. They were afraid because they thought he was a ghost.

Now, this doesn't mean there are actually ghosts—as in departed spirits of human beings who can reveal themselves visibly. The Bible teaches us about angels and evil spirits, but not ghosts. So the disciples' fear does not mean there are actually ghosts. They simply see a figure out there on the water. And it's late at night. Matthew says it was during “the fourth watch of the night” (14:25). That means, sometime between 3:00 and 6:00 am. So they see the figure of a person out there on the water, and the assumption that it was a ghost seemed more rational than the thought that a flesh and blood human being could defy the laws of physics and walk on water. Both possibilities are contrary to nature, so the disciples went with what they *thought* was the most reasonable explanation. And this terrified them.

But it turns out they were wrong. It was, in fact, a flesh and blood human being who was walking on the water. It was a flesh and blood human being who also happens to be God—the author of the laws of physics. But they don't know this, so “they cried out in fear” (14:26).

But Jesus was not doing this to scare them. He was doing this to give them confidence in him. In the end, this would result in the comfort of faith. So Jesus immediately “spoke to them, saying, **‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’**” (14:27)

And then Peter has kind of a bold request: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (14:28). And Jesus actually grants Peter's request. He commands him to come to him on the water. And then Peter actually tries it, and it works! He climbed out of the boat and actually “walked on the water and came to Jesus” (14:28). It's really quite remarkable. It's one thing for Jesus—the eternal God in human flesh—it's one thing for him to walk on water. But Peter—a normal human being? That's something else. So it makes us wonder, *How did Peter do it?* I mean, why was Peter able to walk on water? And if Peter could do it, do you think I could?

For the longest time I used to think it was because Peter had enough faith. That's how I had been taught to understand this passage. The idea was, if you have enough faith, and if you're willing to step out of the boat, you can do anything. But that's just not true. If that's how we think of faith, then it's not really faith in Jesus, but faith in ourselves, or maybe even faith in faith, which amounts to nothing. So it's not because Peter had enough faith that he was able to walk on water. The answer is actually right in the text, and it's really quite simple.

So I was at Bible camp this week hanging out with some preteen kids. And I talked about this passage with them. So I asked them, “Why was Peter able to walk on water?” And I didn't really expect them to get the answer right on the first try. But they did. This little girl raised her hand and said, in a very matter-of-fact way, “Because Jesus told him to.” And she was right. And it struck me that children have this remarkable ability to simply read the Bible for what it says, while adults have this hindrance that we read the Bible expecting it to always be telling us what to do. And sometimes that causes us to miss the point. I had just figured this out the day before as I was studying, and I thought it was some remarkable discovery that it wasn't really because of Peter's faith that he was able to walk on water. I had been reading the passage all wrong. I

thought it was telling me that I needed to have more faith, and then I could do remarkable things like Peter. But I was missing the point. The reason Peter was able to walk on water is simply because Jesus told him to.

I mean, what would have happened if Peter had not asked Jesus to command him to walk on water? What if Peter had just hopped out of the boat and tried it by himself? Even if he had 100% confidence in his ability to walk on water, he would have immediately sunk. The strength of his faith had nothing to do with it.

But when Jesus—the eternal God, who once spoke the world into existence by saying, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), and various other things—and when Jesus, who brings dead people back to life by saying things like, “Lazarus, come out” (John 11:43), or, “Little girl ... arise” (Mark 5:41)—when that Jesus tells Peter to walk on water, he does. The Word of Jesus has power to make dead people come to life. And that same Word of Jesus made Peter walk on water. The power was not in Peter’s faith. The power was in the promise of God.

We have this temptation to use faith as a tool to get what we want. *If I believe enough, I can walk on water or get a big promotion or be the holiest Christian in the congregation.* We’re tempted to use faith to glorify ourselves. But that’s not what faith is. Faith is simply the trust that God is our Heavenly Father who loves us and is pleased to save us. And if faith is simply a trust in him, then the effectiveness of faith does not depend on how much of it we can muster up. The effectiveness of faith depends solely on the goodness and strength of the One we trust in. And God’s power and goodness does not change like our ever-wavering emotions.

So Peter walked on water, simply because Jesus commanded it. But then he saw the wind and the waves. He became afraid and began to sink (14:30). And here we see what happens when we trust in ourselves or seek our own glory. We sink, because that’s what humans do in water. It’s also what we do at the end of life when our bodies sink into the grave or when we stand before the judgment seat of God and his perfect Law condemns us. Every human biography ends the same way.

So as Peter begins to sink, that’s when we finally get a picture of saving faith. As his ankles and knees and hips begin to be enveloped by the sea, he cries out, “Lord, save me” (14:30).

And what does Jesus do? He rebukes him, right? He says, “O you of little faith. Don’t you know? You have to work up enough faith in your heart. Then you can walk on water and get back to the boat. I won’t save you unless you have enough faith.” That’s what Jesus says, right?

Of course not! “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ ” (14:31) It’s true. Peter was a little-faith, and Jesus did rebuke him. But he didn’t die because of it. Instead, he was saved. Saving faith simply cries out to Jesus for salvation. And Jesus hears and answers. And when we really think about it, we realize it wasn’t even Peter’s faith that saved him. It was Jesus who saved him. Peter simply cried out to Jesus because he saw that Jesus was still standing on the water, even though Peter was sinking. It was plainly obvious to Peter that if he were to be saved, it would have to be Jesus who does the saving.

And that’s all that faith does. It recognizes that Jesus is our only hope of salvation, and it cries out to him. And then Jesus hears and answers. He does not tell us to work up enough faith within ourselves. He just saves, because the work of salvation has already been completed. He has already been crucified for our sins—including all our doubts and weaknesses. He has

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already been raised from the dead. He has already appeared before the judgment seat of God and presented his holy and precious blood as the atonement for our sins.

So we call upon him—even in the midst of doubt and sin and weakness and death. We call upon him, not from our place of glory and strength as water-walkers, but from our place of weakness and death as sinkers. And Jesus answers, because it is not the strength of your faith that saves you, but the goodness and strength of the One you trust in. “For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ ... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ ” (Rom. 10:11, 13) Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.