

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 13, 2023
“From the Waters Lifted Me” (Matthew 14:22-33)

In last week’s gospel, we read that Jesus, after hearing the news of John the Baptist’s death, needed some time away to grieve, and rest, and be alone with God. However, when he stepped off the boat and onto the shore of what he thought to be a lonely place, a place of anticipated peace and rest, crowds of people were waiting for him with their many and various needs. And Jesus had compassion for them. He took the time he had scheduled to care for himself and used it to care for them. He healed their sick, gave them hope, and, at the end of the day, fed more than five thousand people with five loaves and two fish.

As the sun was setting, the multitude was healthy, happy and refreshed, but Jesus must have been completely exhausted. Even more than before, he needed to get away for some quiet time with his heavenly Father. So after the crowds had left, as he had commanded them, Jesus turned to his disciples and told them to get into the boat and go back to the city. He wanted to be alone for a while.

He then found a place of solitude where he spent the evening experiencing the peace and stillness of the Galilean night. The soft-blowing breeze and the distant sound of the breaking waves offered him the relaxation he so desperately needed. It must have been so nice for him to finally be able to spend some time alone with God. It was a time to be re-energized; a time to get some rest for his tired body and strength for his soul.

But out on the lake, unlike Jesus, the disciples were not experiencing stillness and peacefulness. In fact, they were in trouble and extremely worried about their safety. In the deep, dark hours of the early morning, a terrible storm had descended on them. There they were in the middle of the lake, battling the wind and waves, fighting to stay afloat. The harder they tried to control and maneuver the boat, the more they were tossed aimlessly about in the darkness of the storm. As the winds grew stronger and the waves more deliberate in their attack on the small fishing boat, the disciples became paralyzed with fear. What would they do? What would happen to them? Is this the way they would go?

Most of us have not experienced the fear of impending death, but we’ve probably asked these or similar questions at some point in our lives; for none of us are strangers to fear. As we have sailed along in the boat of life, we, too, have passed through some very frightening storms, storms in which we wondered how of if we would survive.

Think about a storm you have experienced. It might have been a time when you stood by the casket of a loved one, facing an uncertain future and wondering how life could possibly go on. It might have been a time when you were laid off from your job and were plagued with worry about how you would support and provide for your family. Perhaps it was a time you lay in a hospital bed seriously ill, or anxiously awaited the results of some test. Maybe it was a time your marriage was in trouble or a time when you jeopardized a very special relationship because of something you said or did and worried whether or not that friend or family member could ever forgive you.

These are just a few examples of the troubled times we face, the unpleasant and unexpected storms through which we sail. But what makes these storms even more fierce and fearful is that we lose sight of the bigger picture. As you and I are tossed about in these hopeless situations like the disciples on the sea, we focus only on the problem at hand. We look to ourselves and place confidence in our own abilities to get us through. But, we often find out the hard way that what we are able to do is not always enough. The disciples quickly discovered that their human strength and wisdom were no match for the overpowering storm. That is our reality, as well.

There is good news, however. And the good news is that Jesus is there, serving as the captain of our ship, steering us safely through the storms in our lives, turning our fear into peace and our despair into hope.

Yes, Christ is always there. We have that promise. But sometimes we fail to recognize him. The disciples didn't recognize Jesus when he came walking to them on the water, nor did they recognize the help and security he was bringing to their lives at that moment. In fact, thinking he was a ghost, they were even more terrified, as together they cried out in fear.

But immediately, Jesus spoke to them. *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.* Can you imagine how comforting those words of Christ must have been? How they must have put the disciples' fears to rest? Only a few hours earlier, they had seen him perform a great miracle; and *now* he was walking on the water! Maybe they would survive the storm after all. And they would.

Hearing their cries for help, Jesus had entered the dangerous waters. As he walked on the sea toward the struggling boat, he felt the spray against his face and the force of the wind pushing at his back. Jesus knew the danger, but he went to join his disciples and save them from the stormy waters. Likewise, Jesus comes to you and me in the raging storms of our lives. He meets us at the point of our greatest need.

But Peter, impetuous Peter, needed more proof: *Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.* Jesus said, *Come*, and Peter stepped out onto the crashing waves. But he wasn't there long when he lost his focus. When Peter realized what he was doing, he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the high waves swirling all around him. Instantly, he began to sink. But Jesus reached out his hand and, from the waters, lifted him. Jesus then carried him to the safety of the boat, as the wind ceased and the storm miraculously calmed.

That night, out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, twelve men whose hearts were still pounding from fear, finally recognized Jesus as the Son of God and realized that only he had the power to save. Yes, Jesus saves! But this doesn't mean that our storms will stop if we keep our eyes on Jesus. The storm may, in fact, continue for what seems a long time. But through the spray and the splash of waves, Jesus will be there calling to us: *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*

As disciples of Christ, living in a sinful and broken world, we are always serving in the midst of winds we can't understand. And there is no way we can meet the struggles of everyday life all by ourselves. We need our Savior to accompany us and help us through.

We also need him to give us a push now and then so that we might dare to enter the struggles of others and the problems of the world. This is what he calls us, as his disciple, to do. He calls us to speak a message of hope in the midst of the storm. He calls us to bring a calming presence to those who feel tossed to and fro by the waves of life. Jesus calls us to follow him. Just as he called Peter, he calls you and me to step into the water, to wade out a little bit deeper and wet our feet in his love.

Now, his calling us to follow him doesn't mean that Jesus comes to take away all of our hardships, our struggles, or our doubts. For as long as we live on this earth, we will encounter troubles and trials. The storms will rage and we will find ourselves sinking; sinking in sin, sinking in addiction, sinking in a failing marriage or troubled relationship; sinking in our attempts at parenthood or caring for our aging parents, sinking in a dead-end career. And as if that's not enough for us to bear, we are even called to enter the problems of others, as well. But out in the midst of the storm, we hear another sound over and above the howling wind and crashing waves: *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*

You and I can't save the world. We can't even save ourselves; but we are met by One who can and does save – both us and the world. As you encounter the strong winds and waves in your own lives and dare to enter the storms of others, listen to the reassuring voice of Jesus who bids us not to fear. Then you, too, can sing about Jesus: *And the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry; From the waters lifted me, now safe am I. When nothing else could help, love lifted me.* Amen.