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~ Matthew 14:22-23 ~

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Hi everyone. I am Bishop Jason Zinko, serving the Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod of the ELCIC – sharing the lands of Treaties 1, 2, 3, 5, and the Robinson Superior Treaty.

The Holy Gospel for this 11th Sunday after Pentecost according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Immediately he made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

This is the Gospel of the Lord,

Praise to you, O Christ.

I would imagine that most of you here know this story. You have probably heard it many times before. And even if you haven't heard the story or you're not sure of the details, I'm sure that you're familiar with the fact that Jesus walked on water. This is, after all, one of Jesus' more well-known miracles.

But as we hear this story again today, I wonder what stood out for you. I wonder if your imagination was drawn to the fact that Jesus sent the disciples on ahead of him. Or maybe it was the stormy seas and the disciples afraid in the boat. I can imagine that some of you zeroed in on Peter stepping out of the boat at Jesus' command. And some of you may have connected with Peter sinking and crying out for help. Some of you will no doubt understand the anxiety and doubt that blankets the whole story. And others would have seen God's grace revealed in this story.

In the work that I do, I am generally working with congregations – with groups and systems. And, I usually work with those groups during periods of anxiety and unhealth. So, the version of this story that often comes to me is the one that focuses on the disciples being in a boat out to sea, taking on water, and needing saving. And just between you and me, it's not usually saving that they want – it's a return to happier times that happened yesterday.

I can empathize with that story. And I can relate.

But I don't think that's the story that Matthew is telling.

This story, in the end, is not about anxiety, fear, failure, or doubt. This is a story about faith and grace.

This gospel reading comes right on the heels of last week's story of Jesus feeding the 5000. In fact, it comes 'immediately' after the crowds have finished eating and the leftovers have been gathered. Jesus hadn't even been allowed to mourn the death of John the Baptist yet, and so after the crowds leave and the disciples are sent on their way, he takes some time alone with God on the mountain.

Then the scene switches over to the disciples. They are tired after fighting the wind and waves all night. They think they see a ghost and are frightened. When Peter does take a chance that he can walk on water, he ends up almost sinking before being pulled out of the water and back onto the boat.

Our normal read of this is to say, "Well, Peter sank because he doubted. If he just didn't doubt, he would have been fine."

Maybe that's true. Maybe, if Peter had kept his eyes on Jesus and believed beyond all doubt that his faith would allow him to do the impossible, this story would have ended differently. And there are some religious traditions that would say that if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, we'll never sink again.

But there's a problem with that message. The problem is, basically, that it's a load of you-know-what.

I can't think of a single person who has ever had total, unwavering faith in the face of all obstacles and challenges. I have never heard of anyone with such a strong faith that doubt never crept into their minds through any storm.

Think about the metaphorical storms that we face. We are scared, anxious, and insecure about a lot of things. We worry about kids and grandkids, friends, significant others,

finances, health, politics, work, and on and on. We worry about if we will be accepted for who we are, if we have the courage to speak up when needed, and about the world around us.

Those worries can toss us around like we're adrift at sea. And no matter how often we try to leave it in God's hands, we can't help but be distracted and try to take care of all those things on our own. I mean really, there is no shortage of things that we can worry about. And to hear "oh just keep your eyes on Jesus and everything will be OK" doesn't help matters. In fact, I think that it might just make us feel worse. Because then we would have to worry about being a bad disciple on top of everything else.

To me, reading the story this way takes away from the gospel, and turns the story into plain old advice. Don't get me wrong; it is good advice. We should keep our eyes on Jesus. But to leave it at that robs the story of the gospel that lies at the heart of it.

I would say that to hear the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ – in this reading, we need to forget about Peter for a minute and look at what Jesus is doing. Jesus was the one that went to the disciples. Jesus was the one willing to prove (again) who he was. Jesus was the one who reached out and caught Peter in his most desperate time.

As fellow imperfect disciples, we need that Jesus. We need that good news that no matter what storms we face, Jesus will be there to catch us. We need to know that not even an ocean can separate Jesus from his disciples. We need to know that despite our imperfections, we are perfect and loved in the eyes of Christ, and we are worth being grabbed before slipping under.

The life of faith is not perfect. Even the disciples who traveled with Jesus saw death, injustice, and brokenness. They saw fear and doubt. Jesus didn't magically make that go away. But through it all, Jesus was still there to help and to heal, to guide and to teach, to love and to forgive.

We too, see death, injustice, and brokenness. More often these days we hear about groups being marginalized. We hear about leaders fostering conflict and polarizing the people they lead. We hear about record-breaking profits while large portions of our country suffer and struggle to pay for life necessities. It is understandable that being bounced around in seas like those we too will have our moments of doubt, anger, and fear.

But that *is* the life of faith. It is not about being perfect and completely unwavering no matter what. The life of faith is one in which we know we will not be perfect, but where we know enough to realize that we need God's saving grace in Jesus.

We will fail as disciples. Of that, I am sure. But I am even more sure that Jesus will reach out to catch us in our doubt and fear and failure. It doesn't matter our size, shape, colour, expression, experience, or station. Jesus will continue to call us, continue to hold us up, and continue to lead us on. That is the faith and grace that we can rely on.

There's one least thing that's worth mentioning.

This wasn't the end of the story for the disciples.

Jesus continued to call and lead his disciples into ministry in the world. Despite their imperfections, Jesus goes on with his disciples to heal people, eat with those on the margins, restore people, witness Christ's Transfiguration, and continue in ministry after Jesus' death and resurrection.

And Jesus continues to call us into that work as his disciples. Despite our flaws, our moments of doubt, and our imperfections, Jesus calls us to be with the marginalized, to feed the hungry, to bring comfort, to bring healing, and to live out and share the promise of life and grace that we have come to know through the gospel.

I pray that you and you congregations will have the courage to hear Jesus' call, to risk getting out of the boat, and to know when we need Jesus' help to carry us and move us forward.