

Sermon – Matthew 14:22-33
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Grace Lutheran Church
11 Pentecost – Year A
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“Lord, Save Me”

Friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. In attempt to wring a bit more summer out of summer, we made our way to the Indiana Dunes yesterday to spend a little time on the Lake Michigan shore. I have heard tell in these modern times of parking lots close to the beach, allowing one to enjoy a brief walk from car to water. Another in our party, who shall remain nameless, had a different idea. So it was that we reached the beach halfway through a five-mile walk through the woods, beset by gnats and afflicted with hills. When our son asked his mother, I mean this unnamed person, why we were doing this, he was simply told, “This is what makes memories memorable.” It did, I confess, make reaching the beach feel like an accomplishment. We stood for a bit as the waves rather lazily lapped the shore. It was calm, peaceful, beautiful. Which great lakes and seas and oceans often are. At least when the wind is calm and the storm clouds are kept at bay. At least, especially, when one’s toes are planted in the sand and not on the deck of a boat.
2. One imagines the disciples, many of them used to fishing these waters, all of them recently fed and filled by Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the 5,000, getting into the boat that night with high hopes. A calm journey through known waters. After all, the Sea of Galilee is no great lake; it’s barely a good one in terms of size. At 64 square miles, it pales in comparison to the 22,000 square miles of Lake Michigan. Heck, it’s smaller than Lake Winnebago near which I

grew up in northeast Wisconsin. If you've ever had the privilege of standing on Galilee's shore, you know that it's easy enough to see clear across. All of this was, I'm sure, of small comfort to the disciples when the storm rolled in, battering their little craft and threatening them with ruin. A sea need not be big to be treacherous. There is a reason that the Book of Genesis tells of God commencing creation not so much out of nothingness as out of the chaos of the watery deep. God's creative order, following the creation of light, begins with the emergence of heaven and earth separated from the chaos of water. If one were to map it, the oceans that were left would be labelled, "Here be dragons." Water, so necessary for life, so beautiful and calm, also holds the power of chaos and destruction.

3. It is easy enough to imagine ourselves in the boat with the disciples. Not because we have spent many rough nights on stormy seas, although perhaps you have. No, it's easy to imagine because we have all felt the sudden forces of chaos and destruction appear out of nowhere in the night. A phone call in the night. Hard news unlooked for. Surprise diagnoses. Calamity and catastrophe. We live under these storm clouds constantly, and these days it feels less like if, and more like when, the storm will break upon us. We lift up our eyes; from where will our help come?
4. In the darkness, a figure emerges. As if natural disaster isn't bad enough, it seems supernatural disaster is at hand. "A ghost!" they cry out. Instead, in the storm, a voice both commanding and calm: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." What unfolds is a well-known scene. Peter is an impulsive mix of courage and doubt. Doubting his friend, Jesus, he asks for proof. He steps out of the boat and walks toward Jesus on the water. Doubting the proof of his feet on the waves, he begins to sink. Peter, ready to give up his own ghost, gives up all pretense, too. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" And save him the Lord does.

5. I recently read *Dead Wake*, Erik Larson's moving account of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the maritime disaster that helped propel the U.S. into the First World War. The *Lusitania* was captained by William Thomas Turner. Captain Turner is a fascinating figure for many reasons, including for the notable fact that he was able to swim. It seems counterintuitive to a landlubber like me, but it turns out most sailors of that time did not know how to swim. This was not because they had such great faith in their vessels, or that nature would spare them. It was because they "still held the belief that there was no point in knowing how to swim, since it would only prolong your suffering." Once you were in the water, they thought, it was better to just give up and give in. Who, after all, could possibly come to your rescue in time?

6. I wonder, though I do not know, if such similar wisdom was passed from fathers to sons as they mended their nets on Galilee's shore and prayed for good weather and safe passage. Peter sure seems to know that he is beyond saving unless Jesus actually turned out to be who he said he was. As Peter goes under the waters, his words are a primal confession of faith: "Lord, save me!" Jesus, after all, has just now revealed himself again. What our translation renders as, "Take heart, it is I," it actually, "Take heart, I AM." Jesus is the I AM, the voice that spoke to Moses from the burning bush, the very Word by which land emerged from the waters of chaos. This scene is not about how Peter should have tried harder or believed more firmly. And it's not about those things for us, either. We need not be so solipsistic. This is about Jesus. On his own, Peter wouldn't have a hope in the world. But in Jesus, hope has entered the world. And hope reaches out its hand and pulls Peter in. This is what Paul means in his letter to the church in Rome, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, you will be saved." He does not mean developing ironclad intellectual arguments for our faith. He means simply looking to Jesus, whoever you are, as the One – the only One – who can save. We're all the same in that regard. Jews or Greeks, as Paul puts it, whoever you are. It's not that we're all in the same boat. It's that we're all *out*

of the same boat, so varied and unique, yes, but absolutely identical in our need. We were drowning, and then the Word came near. I AM is here. He holds out his hand to you again today.

7. Jesus, it turns out, goes all the way under the waters for us. The storm of sin, the doom of death, the enmity of the evil one all conspire to do him in. But just there, in the baptismal flood, we are joined to his death and resurrection. We receive the promise of the far shore and life in this world. The Word is forever near you, on your lips and in your heart. In the raging storms, Christ is with you. In the quiet spaces we cultivate, Jesus speaks. The world's uncertainties are not going away. As in the days of Elijah, so today. There are winds, and earthquakes, and fires – both real and, sometimes worse, metaphorical. There is silence so stony we wonder if a word will ever come. But we need not give in. As you come forward in just a bit, to receive just a bit of bread and wine, you can trust that as your hand closes around Christ, his hand closes around yours. He's got you, and he's not letting go. Friends, your feet aren't beautiful because they stay dry upon the waves; they are beautiful because they bring good news to a drowning world. Hold on tight. Do not be afraid. Go and tell. To a world in need of saving, give 'em Jesus, the great I AM. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.