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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14A)

August 13, 2017

Text: Matthew 14:22–33

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ walks on the water. It's certainly a first-order display of divine power. Only God can do that, right? Exactly. Only God can walk on the waters. That's what the prophet Habakkuk said during a prayer which he offered to the Lord God of heaven and earth, "You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of the mighty waters" (Hab. 3:15). The patriarch Job said something very similar when responding to Bildad, one of Job's three critics, "God alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8). Only God can trample upon the waters.

But today's gospel reading says that Jesus was walking on the water during a powerful windstorm. And that's the point. Jesus is not merely a miracle-worker. The prophets of old performed many miracles with God's power; Elisha the prophet even made an axe head float on water so its owner could retrieve it. But none of the prophets walked on the water. Jesus is God! If you don't have that Biblical assertion established firmly in your mind and ears, you won't understand this Gospel text and all the powerful and beautiful consolation it promises to you.

This gospel reading for today follows immediately after Jesus fed 5,000 men, not including women and children. After everyone was filled with bread and fish, Jesus ordered His disciples to get into a boat and start heading for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. In the meantime, Jesus dismissed the crowd and "went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone..." (vs. 23).

The Lord Jesus prayed during His earthly ministry. That fact alone should encourage us to pray. For not only do we have our Lord's command to pray coupled with our Lord's promise to be heard, and the very prayer we are to pray – the Lord's Prayer composed by the Lord Himself, but we also have our Lord's example. Conversation with our heavenly Father is the most normal thing we Christians do! Not praying is abnormal and contrary to our Lord's command, promise, and example. But sin – which hinders our desire and ability to pray – is the most abnormal thing in this

universe. Thus Jesus admonishes us to pray without ceasing and not to lose heart for our heavenly Father delights in hearing the prayers of His redeemed people.

So Jesus prays. It had been a big day of exhausting ministry for the Lord. Our Lord's refreshment came from prayer and fellowship with His heavenly Father. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, seek those same living waters of refreshment, which are offered to us all through prayer saturated with God's living Word.

But the evening's work wasn't done. While Jesus was being refreshed and renewed through prayer with His Father, the disciples were trudging away in the boat against the wind. It didn't appear they were in any danger. They just were working hard to make headway.

Seeing their trouble, Jesus went walking on the water toward His disciples during the "fourth watch of the night", that is, sometime between 3–6 am. It's at this point the disciples become terrified (vs. 26)! Before they saw Jesus, they may have been fatigued and/or frustrated with the situation. But the Biblical witness only mentions fear when they see Jesus doing only that which God can do: walking on the water!

The disciples don't recognize Jesus. Instead they thought He was a ghost. After all, they saw someone or something walking on the water in the midst of powerful windstorm. Because of such mistakenly ghoulish ideas, they thought the time of their death had come.

Immediately, Jesus responds to their mistaken fears. We, the readers of Matthew's gospel, should hear these words as from God Himself for only God walks on the water, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (vs. 27). The God-man Jesus speaks powerfully and comprehensively to their situation. To their terror and loss of courage, Jesus says, "Take heart." To their mistaken notion that Jesus is a ghost, Jesus says, "it is I." To their fear, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid."

God manifested in the man Jesus has arrived. Courage and a renewed heart are restored while terror is cast out. True knowledge of who Jesus is, the very *I am* of the Old Testament Scriptures, is made clear for all to see. Debilitating fear is driven far away for Jesus speaks words of peace which faith clings to above all things! God is walking on the water to save us! Alleluia! The Lord God almighty reigneth over all creation for the salvation of His people.

We ought to pause here for a moment and ask ourselves why Matthew records this event in our Lord's life. Does he add it because it makes for a good story? Good entertainment. Perish the thought. To be sure, we learn from this that Jesus is God in human flesh as He walks on the water. But when does courage, true knowledge of Jesus, and lack of fear arise? When Jesus speaks; that is, when God speaks.

Our Lord does not come to us in awesome majesty and awful displays of power. Rather, He comes to us in words. Jesus speaks to us, that is, God speaks to us through the means of His holy Word. It's God in male flesh and blood that says, "I have come that My people can have peace. I baptize with water in My name, claiming them as My own unto the end of the age. I forgive their sins through My death and resurrection. I call you to walk in faith and obedience when the raging storms of life in this world swirl around you." When we hear words of Jesus, we hear the words of God Himself.

The experiences of life may frighten and discourage you; they may, in fact, cause you to doubt God's love and grace. Weren't the disciples on the Galilean waters at night because of Jesus?! Where are you Jesus? What are you doing Lord? Or have you ever asked or at least thought, What are not doing, Lord? To His Word we must cling at all times and in all places. To His Word is where we go even when His actions in our lives create questions, fears, doubts, and uncertainty of every kind.

The psalmist Asaph questioned the workings of God in the world. Asaph's experiences taught him that the wicked prospered, that righteousness and faith in God were useless. At least, until he went to God's house and heard God's Word. Then he took courage; then he knew God's work and ways better. Listen to Asaph inspired hymn from Psalm 73:1–3; 16–19, 28

¹Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. ²But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. ³For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

¹⁶But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ¹⁷until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. ¹⁸Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. ¹⁹How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!

²⁸But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

Peter hears Jesus' voice and makes a surprising request. Vs. 28, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." We aren't sure of Peter's motivation – a zealous desire to be with Jesus or doubt seeking more proof. Be that as it may, Jesus gives Peter permission to join Him on top of the waves. Peter walks on the water and actually goes to where Jesus is!

All is well, for a bit. Scripture says that Peter saw the wind, became afraid, and began to sink (vs. 30). He took His eyes off Jesus. Does not Hebrews 12:2 admonish us, "O come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." Thanks be to God Peter remembers to pray, "Lord, save me" (vs. 30). Jesus immediately reaches out His hand and saves Peter. Prayer is the most natural thing we Christians do.

Jesus' response to Peter indicates this was a failure for Peter. "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (vs. 31). Our Lord's words to Peter are a rebuke, a gentle chastisement. It's as if Jesus were saying, "Do you think I'd let you perish in the chaos of this world without my grace and life? Do you think My love endures only as long as things are easy and successful?" Our Lord Jesus will never abandon us even when we are disciples of little faith. He may rebuke us and correct us. But Jesus will never leave us. This Jesus went to the cross and tomb for His people. Yes, even for His little-faith disciples.

Peter and Jesus return to the boat. In other words, Peter walks on the water again...with Jesus. Two things happen when they arrive at the boat. The wind and the waves settle down. And the disciples worshipped Jesus confessing, "Truly you are the Son of God" (vs. 32–33). We Christians can be rather slow in understanding who Jesus is, slow to perceive His works and ways. Jesus is not simply a miracle worker who can heal the sick and feed thousands of people with virtually nothing. This is God's Son. He's worthy of worship, praise, and adoration even when things around us don't make any sense to us. Jesus remains good, loving, and steadfast.

Jesus does only what God can do: die and rise again for the salvation of the world even a world with little-faith disciples. Whatever God does, He does for our good. Glory be to Jesus for truly you are the Son of God.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.