On Rough Seas—Mt 14:22-33

Jesus Walking on the Water may be the title we give our reading for today from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, but we could just as easily think of this passage as the Disciples in the Boat. It’s Jesus who sends them on in the boat, sends them on while he remains on shore, sends them on (temporarily) without him. Temporarily, Matthew focuses us on Jesus, who sends his disciples on in the boat, who sends the crowds off to their homes, and who goes up onto the mountain to pray and to be by himself—remember, he’s been wanting that time ever since news of John the Baptist’s execution was brought to him.

So we begin there with Jesus, in the gathering evening darkness and the quiet on the top of the mountain. It’s good to be with Jesus there, to dwell, even if only very briefly, even if only for the length of a sentence of Scripture—it’s good to be there with Jesus even that long. We have all, I suspect, enjoyed the hush of evening at some point in our lives. It’s been good to enjoy that hush alone, and it has been good to share that hush with someone. Here, for a moment, we get to enjoy that time with Jesus.

Suddenly we are shifted to the disciples in the boat, and we see clearly that the calm we had been enjoying alongside Jesus on the mountain is, veritably, the calm before the storm, or the calm that happens simultaneously with the storm, for, quiet as it is there with Jesus,

St. Matthew tells us that it is already storming on the sea: “by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them” (14:24). I suspect many of you have experienced such moments, probably not at sea, but maybe standing in the field, or sitting in the combine: calm and dry where you are, but there, just off to the north, or the south, the dark clouds pouring down heavy rain. It can, at the same time, be so peaceful and yet so tumultuous.

That image of those disciples in that boat has long been a rich symbol for believers, a symbol of the Church. Jesus has sent us out; he is not physically with us. Jesus has sent us off onto the waters of the world, to navigate truly, diligently, faithfully. There are times when it feels like smooth sailing, and times when we are in the midst of rough seas. You don’t have to have experience with sailing to get the sense of being in heavy seas: just think of being on one of those insane roller coasters that take you up, up, up . . . only to drop you down, down, down. To be candid, I don’t like roller coasters.

So there those disciples are, tossed and rocked around, and there we are, with them, in that boat, in that storm, on that sea, for that boat can be thought of as a symbol for the Church, and it isn’t always smooth sailing on calm seas with fair winds for the Church. St. Matthew says, quite plainly, that “the wind was against them.” Now, there are times in Scripture when the wind is a way of talking about the Holy Spirit,

and there are times when wind is just wind, and there are times when wind represents the will of the powerful, the powers of this world; we might call it the spirit of the times, the wind of history with a preposterously large H.

It wasn’t long after the death of Jesus that officials in Judea began persecuting the followers of Jesus. It wasn’t long after that that the Romans began to persecute Christians throughout the empire, and that went on, sort of cyclically, for the next three hundred years or so. Christians have always had to navigate in rough seas, because in one way or another, the powers of this world, in this life, have been set against God and God’s ways. The wind has always, to one extent or another, been against us, including today.

When St. Matthew tells us, then, that the wind was against the disciples there in that boat on that churning sea, we can think of the wind as wind and nothing more. The wind does blow on the sea, after all, and there are storms at sea. We can take it literally. We’re missing something, though, if we leave it at that. Think of the situation of those followers of Jesus. Several of them are experienced fishermen: they have been in rough waters before, so they know the difficulties and the danger they are facing. Along with their courage and determination, they are also experiencing fear. Jesus is not with them there in the boat, not physically. They know he is not there. And they are afraid, because the wind is strong, angry, and it is against them. It is against us. How is the wind against us?

Let me briefly put off answering that by saying this: the wind is trying to blow us in the direction it is going. If the wind is blowing to the east, then it is also trying to blow us to the east. We have some options. We can let ourselves be blown along with the wind. That’s the easiest thing to do. That’s been the preferred option of the majority in this denomination—most of what get called the “mainline” denominations—for some time, more than a hundred years. That’s not likely to change.

You’ve got to change with the times. Perhaps, but first let’s consider the nature of the changes. Sometimes change comes from God. I believe the civil rights movement was largely change that came from God. Others may not be quite as confident as I am about that. Fine. When *Mad Men* first aired, I enjoyed watching the show. Sure, it was a high-end soap opera, boiling over with affairs, infidelity, mistresses, and so on, but the writers were also clearly having a bit of fun with the way attitudes had changed over the last fifty years. I’m glad, for example, that we no longer think of our female co-workers as being there primarily to bring the men coffee. There have been some changes in our society that, to my mind, we have been called to by God. The danger is then to make the mistake of thinking that all social change is pleasing to God, that every wind that blows comes from the mouth of God.

Some winds do not come from the mouth of God, and God’s Word helps us to discern; God’s Word tells us. There is the wind that howls there are many ways to God. God’s Word says no one comes to the Father except through the Son (Jn 14:6). There is the wind that howls all will be saved. God’s Word tells us many times of those who will end up being cast out, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt). There is the wind that placidly drifts that since Scripture is a historical product of its times, we must in turn fashion a faith for our times. Take Scripture as a product of its times, then, and it will still tell you quite plainly what comes of making a faith to suit yourself, idols after your own heart. Take Scripture as God’s Word, transcending the historical and cultural circumstances of its being written down, and how much more damning is Scripture’s testimony regarding human waywardness!

What to do? “Trust the God within?” We hear talk like that, but it’s nonsense to Christian ears: God is within us only as we have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior—confessed with the lips and believed with the heart, as St. Paul tells us. God is within us only as we have received the Holy Spirit, which works within us to reshape us, to reform us, into ever greater Christ-likeness. The Holy Spirit will not shape us after the winds and fashions of the present age but after the mind and heart of God, in harmony with God’s Word.

“Trust the God within” is the sort of talk we hear from pagans, who someway think they are already divine, merely trapped in temporary flesh.

We’re not divine. We’re fallen, wayward, wounded creatures. The German philosopher Nietzsche loathed Christians and Christianity for just this reason: this talk of fallenness, waywardness, woundedness, this talk of weakness. If you never bother trying to follow God, if you never bother trying to be faithful to God, you can rest in the falsehood of your strength. It’s when you try to follow God, when you embark on the way of faithfulness, commit yourself to it for life, that you discover the true extent of your weakness, the weakness that comes with waywardness, the waywardness that comes with being fallen. And, realizing all that, of course you’ll cry out to God, just like those disciples in that boat on that churning sea, being blown by a wind that was against them—not for them, not in favor of them, not for their benefit or blessing but a wind blowing for their destruction.

And oh, how they wish Jesus was with them, there in the boat. “And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea” (14:25). Early in the morning . . . of course it is, because Jesus reveals his power, his life power, his redemption power, his resurrection power, early in the morning, even before the first light, the first dim glow of the new day. But this also tells us that the disciples had to weather an entire night on that storm-tossed sea.

And they were afraid, and more than afraid, terrified, by the time that early hour comes. Jesus comes walking to them on the sea. How could any man walk on water? We sink, we plunge, we go under. And Jesus walks on that water, walks like the Lord of Creation.

“But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear” (14:26). To be in the presence of a ghost is to be in the presence of death, for ghosts are the ghosts of the dead. Those disciples see this apparition—Jesus must still be at a distance, and, of course, the disciples, wishing and praying in their terror that God would save them, wailing in their hearts, “If only Jesus was here!”, they would not have imagined that Jesus would walk over the water to them. All the marvelous things they had seen Jesus do, but walking on the water? Apparently that would have been too marvelous. Those disciples think they see a dead man coming towards them in the midst of churning death, the seas and the winds not seeking their welfare, but seeking to take their life, to extinguish their life, to take the life of those disciples and add it to the death all around them.

Why did Jesus send them out on that water in the first place? Why did he send them on without also being there in the boat with them? Why wasn’t he there? Wasn’t he there, though? Even before he walked out to them, wasn’t he there? How is Jesus with us? Surely Jesus is with us?

If Jesus is not with us, right now and every day of our lives, through every sunny day and every storm, woe is us! How is Jesus with us? By faith, through the Spirit. Why does Jesus send those disciples out without getting in the boat with them? In part, at least, to encourage them to lean on their faith, to rely upon their faith, to put all their hope and trust and love in this life and for the next into their faith. We live by faith.

And just when it seems that their faith is beginning to give way before fear, to sift away before the wind that is against them, Jesus comes to them, answering their prayer magnificently, gloriously, powerfully. And they’re terrified and think it’s a ghost! And so what does Jesus do? What does St. Matthew say? What do we read in Scripture? Immediately, Jesus speaks to them. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (14:27).

Peter—God bless him!—Peter, emboldened beyond the rest, doesn’t want to wait for Jesus to come the rest of the way to them; Peter wants to go right away to Jesus, and Jesus, knowing the opportunity, bids Peter come to him, out of the safety of the boat, across the water, on the water. And Peter almost makes it, doesn’t he? And he remembers that. Maybe he even remembers that just after he denies for the third time knowing Jesus.

Jesus gets into the boat, and the wind ceased. Jesus quells all the winds that are against us. They’ll blow again, those winds, those winds of this world.

They’ll blow again and again until Jesus comes again, to quell all winds that are not the wind from God. Jesus will come again, beloved, and Jesus comes to us many times, in the midst of the storms that toss and tear and turn our lives around.

He comes to us in the midst of our fear and our terror, he comes to us when our faith seems so feeble, and he says “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” And he gets into the boat, and the winds cease.

Pray, brothers and sisters, pray that in the midst of the winds that are against the Church, the winds that seem to be against even our little church here in Delavan, pray for God to speak His Word, and listen to the Word He speaks. Pray that God would come to us, and get in the boat with us, and have faith, beloved, that He already has, He already is.

And to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.