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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 14, Series A (Pentecost 10)
Saturday, August 12th, 2017
Sunday, August 13th, 2017

Sermon: God in the Storm
Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Focus: Jesus Christ is true God and true Man.

Function: That they would have no fear in the midst of life's storms because Jesus is with them—and *for* them.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God... and true Man... is my Lord..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Many people cannot stand storms. Thunder, lightning, and howling wind terrify them.

Perhaps you grew up in tornado alley somewhere in Kansas or Oklahoma and spent much of your summers cringing in the basement, crowded around a fuzzy television screen watching the tornado warnings.

Martin Luther, our sainted founder, famously quit law school and became a monk after nearly being struck by lightning. Jolted out of his spiritual stupor, he cried out, "St. Anne, save me!" Luther's life was spared—albeit *not* by St. Anne!—and he entered the monastery, setting out on an inevitable course towards a religious revolution that would change Europe and the world.

As for me, I have never been much afraid of storms. I sleep through thunder storms and earthquakes. (*Aside:* But my wife's snoring wakes me up in the middle of the night. Go figure!) I actually enjoy watching the lightning crackle across the sky and the strange feeling of driving rain upon your face. When I was a child, I used to put on my swim trunks during rainstorms and

dance around in the backyard, squishing the mud between my toes. (*Aside: My sons have taken to this activity as well!*).

And yet, I can attest to the devastation of storms, having been a victim of the 1993 floods in Milwaukee that flooded our finished basement, ruining furniture and family heirlooms. And I also helped in New Orleans with cleanup after Hurricane Katrina. I was part of a Lutheran Disaster Response team that mucked out houses and gutted churches down to the studs, trying to save the structures from the curse of black mold.

You might say that the disciples in our Gospel lesson were used to storms. Several of them were fishermen, after all. Their livelihood and very lives depended on the winds and rains as they fished the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee was actually a freshwater lake, not a sea, with an average depth of less than 30 feet. That's actually quite *shallow*, in case you didn't grow up in the lake country of the Upper Midwest. But at 13 miles long and 8 miles wide, it was a fairly good-sized lake, creating its own weather, including the many fierce storms for which it was famous.¹ Already earlier in Matthew, chapter 8, they endured a storm with Jesus in the boat with them, the scene where he famously calmed the wind and waves after they woke him up.

But where was Jesus now? Jesus made the disciples embark across the lake while he dismissed the crowds after the feeding of the five thousand plus people (Matt. 14:22). They were a long way from shore, but the wind and the waves were against them. Literally, the waves were "tormenting" the boat, which is pretty strong language (and also evokes the earlier storm scene of Matthew 8). Once again, Jesus was off "by himself to pray," trying to get that much-needed rest with the Father (v. 23). But he knew his disciples were in need, and loving Lord that he was, he could not leave them to it.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 2001), Kindle.

So about three o'clock in the morning, Jesus walked out to them on the water. Yes, that's right, he literally *tread* upon the waves just as if it were a walk in the park. (*Aside*: Now let me tell you: I too have walked on water... in Wisconsin... in the middle of January... when the lake is frozen over!) Truly, Jesus was doing something entirely new, unexpected, and impossible—something only God or a ghost could do!

The disciples opted for the latter, even more terrified of Jesus than the waves sweeping over the gunwales of the boat. “It is a ghost!” they cried out in fear.

But Jesus—very much alive, both then and now—was not a ghost, never was a ghost, and never will be a ghost. “Take heart,” he said. “It is I. Do not be afraid” (Matt. 14:27, ESV).²

Some Bible scholars make much of the fact the Greek phrase Jesus uses for “It’s me” is *egō eimi*, a very special way to put things. Sometimes in the Greek Bible, *egō eimi* means simply, “Hey, I’m here. It’s me.” But other times, such as in the Gospel of John, it is the basis for the famous I AM statements, such as “I AM the Light of the World” or “I AM the Bread of Life.” The seven famous I AM statements in John’s Gospel are, in turn, an echo of the divine name in Exodus 3:14, when Yahweh revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush: “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM....’” In the Greek Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, that phrase *egō eimi* is used again. “It’s *Me!* That’s who I am!”

I can see that your eyes are glazing over—it’s all Greek to me! Suffice it to say that Jesus may very well be intentionally invoking the divine name of Yahweh when he shows up on the water. “Take heart! It’s *Me!* The Lord is here! Don’t be afraid” (cp. 14:27).

But the simple Word of Jesus, the power of his promise and presence, are not enough for Peter, who demands, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (v. 28).

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Notice the hesitation: “*If it is* you...” Peter is not sure. And so he foolishly puts the Lord to the test. This is not the first time or the last time that Peter would get in trouble for putting his foot in his mouth. Throughout the Gospels, he is famous for being the first to pipe up and say the wrong thing in a situation. At the Transfiguration, it was Peter who offered to build three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. At the Last Supper, Peter refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet and then asked Jesus to give him an entire bath! When Jesus prophesied that his disciples would betray and abandon him, Peter insisted that he’d rather die than fall away, and yet he would deny Jesus three times before the cock crowed. Clearly, Peter was impulsive and impetuous, always saying the first thing that popped into his head before he thought it through. In fact, that’s one of the reasons why we like Peter so much. He’s the most human of all the disciples, the one most like us in our own faltering faith and fumbling words.

And so Peter said, “Lord, if it *is* you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Jesus, of course, is gentle and patient, even with foolhardy saints like Peter. Thank God for such mercies! So Peter jumped overboard and—to his amazement and delight—found himself standing on the waves just like Jesus! But when he saw the wind, he got scared again. He took his eyes off Jesus and began to drown.

“Lord, save me!” he cried as his lungs filled with water. Blub, *blub*, *BLUB!*

And Jesus *did* save him. That’s what Jesus does because that’s what his name means: “He will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). The Bible says that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13). Peter called, and Jesus answered. He reached right in and pulled Peter out. He saved him.

But Jesus did rebuke Peter. “O you, of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt. 14:31). “Little-Faith” is one word in Greek (*oligopistos*). It’s kind of a nickname and a byword at the

same time. Nobody wants to be called Little-Faith. Yet Jesus repeatedly did exactly that throughout Matthew's Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount he called his disciples Little Faith when they worried about their food and clothing instead of trusting God to provide for them, as he did for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field (6:30). He called his disciples Little Faith when he calmed the storm in chapter 8. He called them Little Faith when they forgot their sack lunches after the feeding of the four thousand (16:8). And he called them Little Faith when they couldn't drive out a demon from a little boy (17:20).

Jesus called the disciples Little Faith because they struggled to believe Jesus' Word. He called them Little Faith because their faith was very small. I must admit that *my* faith is very small too. Perhaps some of you have little faith as well. We struggle to believe that God exists, that he is with us, that he is *for us*, and that he means us well. After his wife died, C.S. Lewis doubted God's goodness and dared to call him "the Cosmic Sadist" (*A Grief Observed*). At times in my life, I too have been tempted to take my eyes off Jesus and listen to the wind instead of his words, choosing to sink in the depths of depression and despair instead of holding onto hope. As I said, I know what it's like to have only a little bit of faith.

And yet a little bit of faith is enough to be saved. A faith as large as a tiny mustard seed is enough to move mountains (17:20). Yet even though I don't have enough faith to do that, all it takes is the tiniest, most infinitesimal amount of faith to be saved. After all, saving faith is a gift, not a reward. In his desperation Peter cried, "Lord, save me!"—and Jesus did.

And he promises to do the same for you and me. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved (Rom. 10:13). No matter what storms in life come your way, whether they are metaphorical, such as unemployment, divorce, addiction, or the death of a loved one, or quite literal, like Hurricane Katrina, God is with you in the storm. God spoke to Job out of the

whirlwind (Job 38:1). Jesus calms the sea and walks upon the waves. He is not afraid because HE IS. Truly, he is the Son of God, worthy of all our worship, for Jesus IS Lord (Matt. 14:33; Rom. 10:9). “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid” (Matt. 14:27). *Egō eimi*. I AM.

When Jesus speaks, the wind and the waves cease (Matt. 14:32; cf. 8:26). But he also speaks to the storm in our hearts: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). There it is again: *Egō eimi*, “I AM.” And He is... for you *and* for me... in our doubt, in our fear, in our loneliness, and in our despair. Jesus IS (Matt. 14:27). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.