

## Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 27, 2017

**Matthew 14:22-33 (EHV)** – <sup>22</sup>Immediately Jesus urged the disciples to get into the boat and to go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. <sup>23</sup>After he had dismissed the crowd, he went up onto the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. <sup>24</sup>By then the boat was quite a distance from shore, being pounded by the waves because the wind was against it. <sup>25</sup>In the fourth watch of the night, Jesus came toward them, walking on the sea. <sup>26</sup>When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and cried out in fear, “It’s a ghost!” <sup>27</sup>But Jesus spoke to them at once, saying, “Take heart! It is I! Do not be afraid.” <sup>28</sup>Peter answered him and said, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” <sup>29</sup>Jesus said, “Come!” Peter stepped down from the boat, walked on the water, and went toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he saw the strong wind, he was afraid. As he began to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” <sup>31</sup>Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand, took hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. <sup>33</sup>Those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God!”

### Introduction

How quickly things can change! It’s strange how quickly it can go from being quiet and still to something so violent and catastrophic and then back to quiet and still again. When a tornado or hurricane is involved, there’s even a moment of calm right in the middle of it all – the eye – before things start blowing in the opposite direction.

In some people’s opinion, there’s something soothing about storms. But that’s obviously not always the case. No one who’s ever been at the mercy of gale force winds – who’s lost life or property – would find anything soothing about a severe storm.

### Theme: Jesus Is the Calm Within the Storm.

As with all of them, the miracle contained in our text reminds us who Jesus is. He’s nothing other than the Son of God. In today’s gospel lesson, we’re especially reminded that **JESUS IS THE CALM WITHIN THE STORM. The storm around us can be frightening. Jesus has us firmly in his grasp.**

### Part I: The storm around us can be frightening.

The Sea of Galilee is several hundred feet below sea level, and storms were pretty common, especially as the cool air coming off of the mountains to the north met the warmer air rising off the lake. That lake is the setting of our Gospel lesson. Somewhere in the vicinity of Bethsaida, on the northeast side of the lake, Jesus had taught and fed the multitudes, both with the word of truth and with some bread and fish. The next leg of his journey involved crossing back to the west side of the sea. Oddly, Jesus sent his disciples on ahead without him.

See, they hadn’t understood Jesus purpose in feeding the 5,000+. Neither had the crowds. That amazing miracle had only stirred them up even more. They saw what a good thing they had, and they wanted to make Jesus their king by force. “Just think of it,” they said – “all the food we could ever want! We’ll never be in need again!”

That kind of thinking could easily have rubbed off on the twelve disciples. Who knows? Maybe they were getting frustrated with the humble and seemingly unstable lifestyle that following Jesus offered.

From other Bible passages, we know that their heads were often occupied with thoughts of a kingdom of power and glory.

It was probably even a temptation for Jesus to be such a king. He was constantly being attacked, and this could be compared with the temptation of the devil when he offered to give Jesus all the riches and nations of the earth.

But that wasn't the kind of king Jesus had come to be. There was a storm brewing around him and he had to bring it under control. The most logical thing to do was to break up the crowd before they tried to bring their distorted vision into reality. **"Immediately Jesus urged the disciples to get into the boat and to go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed the crowd, he went up onto the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone."**

Besides the rumblings of a false concept of the Messiah, an honest-to-goodness storm was forming over the lake and the disciples were about to be caught out in the open. **"By then the boat was quite a distance from shore, being pounded by the waves because the wind was against it."** According to the following verse, the disciples had been rowing for the better part of nine hours. They were moving at a snail's pace and they had to be wondering if they'd ever make it across. I'm sure the spray was hitting them right in the face and they probably couldn't see more than a few yards in front of the boat.

Then they did catch sight of something, but it didn't make them feel any better. **"In the fourth watch of the night, Jesus came toward them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and cried out in fear, 'It's a ghost!'"** Their realistic thinking got the best of them. People can't walk on the surface of a lake! Therefore, the figure they saw couldn't really be Jesus. Of course, as the story goes on, Peter ends up out of the boat, and is soon afraid for his very life as the churning waters threaten to pull him under to his death.

What happened to cause Peter to start sinking? He'd miraculously been walking right on the surface of the water, just as Jesus was. Was Jesus losing his power to hold him up? No, it was when he **"saw the strong wind"** that he became afraid and started going under. Actually, it was a combination of seeing the wind and losing sight of Jesus.

Let me tell you, folks, it's not just our hectic schedules that make us feel like we're living in the middle of a whirlwind. For a while, things are going just fine. We're walking toward Jesus, focusing on serving him in love. Sure, our lives have their difficulties, but nothing we can't overcome with Jesus holding us up. And then everything happens at once. A bright flash of lightning – maybe the sparkling and glittering of material things – makes us blink. The crash of thunder immediately follows – maybe the resounding voice of peer pressure to chase after those worldly pleasures – and it drowns out the voice of our Savior. One wave hits us from the left – maybe the loss of a friend or family member. Another wave hits us from the right – maybe added pressures and deadlines hanging over us at work. The gusting and swirling winds – maybe uncertainty in making the right decision – push and pull us at the same time, making us lose all sense of direction. Has Jesus left us? No – he's right where he's always been. But we're too distracted to look at him and lean on him. We try to swim on our own, but our arms get tired. We don't know if we can tread water any longer. We start to sink and the sea wraps us in its grip. We are, as Jesus says, **"of little faith."**

## Transition

How easily we forget that Jesus is in control! How often we look in every direction for some sort of help except to the only place where it can be found! Take your eyes off of Jesus, and the storms around us can be frightening – deadly. But as always, Jesus has us firmly in his grasp.

## Part II: Jesus has us firmly in his grasp.

Remember back to why Jesus and his disciples went to that remote area in the first place. Jesus wanted to get away from the crowds so he could instruct his disciples and have some time to meditate on his and his Father's mission. Even after a major distraction, Jesus was able to accomplish what he'd set out to do. After he sent his disciples off in the boat and the crowds had dispersed, Jesus went off by himself to speak to his heavenly Father in prayer. We don't have any idea what he prayed for at that particular time, but I can't help but think of Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17. There he prayed for his disciples – that they may be protected from all physical and spiritual harm and that they may be sanctified by the Word of truth. Maybe he prayed that they would come to understand the real meaning of the kingdom of God. Maybe he prayed that they be kept safe during the boat trip across the sea. Whatever the case, Jesus showed his trust in his Father by speaking to him in prayer.

And then, strengthened in his spirit, he set out to lead his disciples to put their trust in him. He walked out on the sea to meet them. And when they saw him and thought he was a ghost, he said, **“Take heart! It is I! Do not be afraid.”** Very literally, he said, “Have courage! I am! Stop being afraid.” Jesus is the “I Am” God of the covenant. He's the calm within the storm. He's promised to uphold us, even in the fiercest storms that threaten us. He fulfilled that covenant by saving us from our sins and pulling us out of the fiery grips of hell.

That command to stop being afraid and to have courage elicits the response of faith. Because Jesus is the “I Am” God, we trust that he firmly has us in his grasp. We aren't even afraid to ask his permission to show us his control by allowing us to walk on top of the storms we face. Peter said, again literally, **“Lord, if you ARE you [and not a ghost], command me to come to you on the water.”** And he did call him. And Peter walked! And when Peter was distracted and called out for help, what happened? **“Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and took hold of him.”**

A firmer grip you cannot find! He who created all things and rules all things with his almighty power is certainly capable of holding you up, safe and sound. And not only is he capable, there's no other way it can be done. If Jesus doesn't hold us firmly in his grasp as we walk heavenward, we're doomed. But he's made a promise to us that he won't leave us and that he'll be with us until the very end of this storm-filled journey. He won't allow too strong of a wind to spin us around or too forceful a wave to wash over us or too bright a flash of lightning to blind us from his love. He, who could tell the wind and the waves to be still, can do the same for our fears and doubts and anxieties. As long as he has us in his grasp, it's like walking on a sea of glass.

## Conclusion

In our culture, hand-holding signifies different things. Children hold an adult's hand for safety reasons. Couples hold hands as a sign of affection. We might grasp someone's hand to offer our encouragement and support. We can never outgrow Jesus holding our hands for those same reasons. As the storms of life threaten you, hold tightly to Jesus and focus your eyes on him, the Savior who says, “Have courage. I am.” Amen.