



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Do You Believe in Ghosts?

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen
on Matthew 14:22-33 (Romans 10:5-15)
on Sunday, August 9, 2020 (10th Sunday of Pentecost)

Ever wish you could take it back? When my older brother, Jim, was 13 or 14, he had a few issues with attitude. One time, he commented unfavorably on mom's cooking, suggesting dogfood might be better. Now, in addition to being a good cook, mom was about the most kind, mild mannered person God ever put on this earth, but she did not take kindly to this comment. So, the next day, brother Jim was served up something different from the rest of us: you guessed it, dogfood. Jim discovered that day that dogfood was actually not as satisfying as mom's cooking.

At that point – and probably much earlier - I think Jim wished he could take back his earlier comment.

I think Peter wished he could take it back, too, moments after he said it. No, it wasn't demeaning of anyone, but he definitely got in over his head (no pun intended). He said to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." In other words, prove that it's you – unwittingly, making himself a guinea pig in the process.

Well, he did manage to stay on top of the water for a few steps, but quickly remembered that he was the opposite of a fish out of water: he was a man out of boat... in a storm! As he looked around at the waves and felt the wind on his face, he sank. "Help, Lord! Save me!" Translation: "What was I thinking?"

This story is among the most familiar in all the Bible and is found in three of the four gospels. Only Matthew, however, includes anything about Peter trying to walk on water. So why does Matthew include this part of the story? Let's explore what this story might be telling us and whether it was a good idea for him to try and walk on water, or not. And whether one believes in the literal account of this narrative, or a more symbolic one, we will concern ourselves with the meaning, not explaining how this miracle could have happened.

This story takes place the day after the feeding of the 5,000 and after Jesus learned his cousin John had been executed by King Herod. That news is both a painful loss to Jesus and foreshadowing of his own fate. On top of that heavy news, Jesus is probably exhausted from his public ministry. So, it should come as no surprise that Jesus is craving solitude to reflect and pray. And maybe push the disciples out of the nest just a bit.

No, really. It says Jesus made the disciples get in a boat and sail during the night from the west side to the east, the Gentile side - not normally where Jews went, but clearly where Jesus' message was destined to go. Meanwhile, no one seemed to notice that storm clouds were gathering in the east. Or, perhaps Jesus did see that? Well, the storm hit during the night, and things got wild and wooly.

Jesus sending his disciples in a boat without him is symbolic of the church being sent out in mission to the other side after Jesus is gone. And in the post-resurrection world after Christ, there would be more than a few storms of opposition that threaten it. The church, and any congregation such as ours, will find itself in uncertain times when its very existence seems in peril. Like now, for instance, and I don't mean the pandemic. Many in congregations everywhere are fearful of the shifting cultural winds that have reduced the sizes of our congregations, and have been for decades. We wonder if we will weather the storm. In the recent interviews some of you participated in, this sentiment was expressed by many. Will we survive the winds and waves of a changing world?

Surely the disciples wondered if they would last the night. Then in the wee hours of the morning, between 3 and 6, Jesus approaches the disciples and he's walking on the water. They don't know what to make of this and cry out that it is a ghost! But Jesus says to them, "Take heart, it is I."

You may recall from Genesis when Moses wants to know God's name and God responds, "I am who I am." There is a very clear echo here. Jesus is saying, "I am here with you - me, Jesus." But he is also saying, "*I am* is with you." Emmanuel. "God with us."

So, if the boat is the church, and the storm represents all the challenges the church will face in an often unsupportive, sometimes hostile world, Jesus showing up reminds

those in the boat that “God is with us – even when we think we’re on our own.” In Jesus, God shows up...time and again.

A woman is caught in adultery, thinking she is about to be stoned to death by self-righteous men, and Jesus shows up. The woman receives mercy. The men are served up humility.

A blind man stands by the side of the road, defying the crowd who has no time for him, all this to seek a life for himself that is free of scorn and social bondage. And Jesus shows up. The man is healed and restored.

The disciples are huddled in a room together, mourning the loss of their master, wondering if they’re next, not sure what to do; and Jesus shows up. Well, I guess you might call that a game changer!

When you or me are in a storm of uncertainty or despair, Jesus shows up. As Mt. Carmel struggles with the uncertainty of its future, Jesus shows up.

Translation: God will see us through and create a future for us filled with promise. Just like he did when his whole church could fit in a fishing boat.

But there is another layer to this story. Jesus showed up, even walking on water to do so, but Peter says, “Lord, If it’s you...” *If*. Peter’s not sure he can trust Jesus’ presence at this point. “If it’s you, command me to come to you!” So, this is kind of interesting. Peter wanted more proof this was Jesus. And yet, in his doubt, he was willing to put it all on the line and walk on water to reach Jesus. Wow! Talk about doubt and faith on display at the same time! But I think we’re all kind of like that. We have ways that we can be so bold in our faith while at the same time struggling with whether we believe Jesus is really out there in the storms of life.

Well, we know what happens now. Peter gets spooked by the wind, starts to sink and Jesus reaches down and saves him. “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Notice, Jesus did not chastise Peter for having NO faith. Little faith. Whatever Peter’s short comings, it didn’t prevent Jesus from saving him.

Do you sometimes wonder if you have enough faith? You need not wonder. In the scheme of things, we may not have all that much faith, but Jesus reaches down to grab us in our weakness, and raises us up!

And when the other disciples saw what happened, they confessed together for the first time: “Surely this man is the Son of God!” And so, they had their first church service ever as Christians right there in the boat. Henceforth, Jesus is the one in whom we will put our trust.

So, what do we make of Peter? Some will read this story and conclude that Peter’s lack of faith was in taking his eyes off of Jesus. This is a lovely and poignant image. The life of faith is learning to keep our eyes on Christ and learning to trust.

But this is not Peter’s biggest stumble that morning. That would be leaving the boat in the first place. Jesus wanted the disciples to trust that he was there with them and would take care of them as they remained in the boat. Just as the church in the centuries following would be asked to trust that God was with them, that Jesus would show up when a storm arose.

Now, many will say that Peter, in stepping out of the boat, was an example of faith for us all. But pay attention to why Peter left the boat: he doubted that Christ was with him; didn’t trust Jesus’ voice. Peter wanted proof that it was Jesus, so he put Jesus to the test. Well, we’re not supposed to put God to the test, just believe. Kind of like Thomas needing to see the holes in Jesus’ hands. So, in an act of misguided faith, Peter sought to imitate Christ by walking on water to him. There’s only one major problem with that: God walks on water, not us. We’re not supposed to try and walk on water and perform miracles. Just be yourself, and trust that Jesus who is with us is the extraordinary one!

At the same time, what Peter did perhaps helped him grow spiritually. It was a baptism of sorts. Yes, there’s the water and all, but more importantly, it was a brush with death and a reminder that baptism is death – the death of our independent self apart from God. And it is the birth of a new self in Christ. Many times in life, when we make decisions both good and bad, we can be reminded that our life is Christ, and apart from God who is with us, we will sink and keep sinking.

Mt Carmelites, there is a great message here for us. The good ship Mt Carmel often seems like we’re in troubled waters. You know, we’re not nearly as big as we once were. And yet, look over the horizon. It’s Jesus, God with us. And since God shows up, there is not only a future, but a bright one. Let’s discover it together. Just stay in the boat. Be the church. That will be quite enough of an adventure! Amen.