



**Southwestern Minnesota Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

*Sermon from Bishop Jon V. Anderson, 2018 Synod Assembly*

Theme: Do Not Be Afraid. It is I. Come...

Theme Text: Matthew 14:27

This passage follows the death of John the Baptizer –

<sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup>When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. <sup>15</sup>When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” <sup>17</sup>They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” <sup>18</sup>And he said, “Bring them here to me.” <sup>19</sup>Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>20</sup>And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

<sup>21</sup>And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

<sup>22</sup>Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup>And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup>but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup>And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup>But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup>But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

<sup>28</sup>Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” <sup>29</sup>He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

<sup>34</sup>When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. <sup>35</sup>After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region, and brought all who were sick to him, <sup>36</sup>and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Thesis –

Jesus faces many headwinds but will not stop his work to save us.

Grace to you and peace, sisters and brothers, in fear and in Christ Jesus, who walks into storms and calms terrible winds to get disciples where God needs them to be. Amen.

What is your favorite kind of storm?

Have you been through any storms lately?

How about storms that are not of the weather kind?

I used to love storms more when I was young. Today the raging force of wild thunderstorms, tornadoes, hurricanes, blinding blizzards are more threatening than exciting. Life is full of enough chaos, and storms of other kinds, before you walk into the uncertainty of heavy weather. Disciples then and disciples now don't want to be caught in the storms that threaten them and those they love.

We don't know why Jesus chose to drive the disciples into the boat and send them out onto the Sea of Galilee. The text says he "drove" them. Maybe he was still needing personal time to process the death of his cousin, John the Baptizer, at the hands of Herod. Maybe he was exhausted after feeding the five thousand. Maybe he just knew he needed some time alone with God...some self-care and God care. I bet the disciples wondered in the middle of the night what Jesus was up to, driving them into the boat that led to the pounding winds and huge waves they were in.

Do you ever think Jesus is driving you somewhere? I do. Do you ever wonder if Jesus is making you do something that you know is risky? Being a person of faith can be scary. Trusting God...following Jesus...is not easy. As we process a world still being transformed by the internet, the church and Christians feel like we are being driven into an alien future where the church's traditions are not valued as they once were. As we imagine a world where our car or tractor drives on its own, it is both exciting and terrifying. We wonder, "What will you need human beings for?" In a world where people travel around the world and our country with ease, it means our congregations have to be ready to receive the gifts of new neighbors. Those gifts might be different history, education levels, financial power, ethnicity, and divergent values to the point you start to wonder where God is driving us. When things get rough, do you wonder where God is and what God is up to? Do you ever wonder if Jesus snookered you and drove you into something that might crush you or is exhausting you? On the other hand, sometimes it takes a storm to get through to a new season of life.

All of us have faced moments when we wonder. All of us have joined Jesus in prayer as we grieve and mourn the tragic losses of people we love, sometimes at the hands of evil people. All of us have been exhausted after seeking to feed people in need and to be faithful. All of us have tried to do the right thing and suddenly the situation is out of control and beyond our abilities. Most of us have been afraid as we challenge injustice, seek to walk faithfully with Jesus, and proclaim the Good News that God loves all people.

There are times when the winds are against us. When a churchwide leader was visiting a couple of weeks ago I thought of this text. Our staff was explaining the hard, changing demographics of rural Minnesota and the way that impacts our beloved communities of faith. When leaders and pastors get together and become vulnerable enough to share our fears, mistakes, failures, and self-doubt, I think of the disciples being pounded in the boat. We all face storms. It can feel like the church is facing an ill wind in these days. As we struggle in an economic time that favors big towns and big businesses, we can become anxious and concerned. Our culture's fears and our own fears can cook up a nasty stew that only God can stop. Only the Gospel can stop the fear, like Jesus came walking across the lake in the windstorm and stopped the storm.

Things were stacking up against Jesus when this lesson comes up in the Gospel of Matthew, but it did not stop him from walking out into the windstorm in the early morning hours to save his terrified disciples in their boat being tortured by winds and waves. Jesus repeatedly enters into our storms to guide us and save us and get us to the other side, where we are needed to do ministry in this swiftly changing world.

Sometimes you have to face your fears to stop them. Jesus can see and understand your fears.

What are you afraid of in your life?

What are you afraid of in your spiritual life?

What are your congregation and community afraid of?

When the disciples were in the boat being tossed around in the waves and winds of that moment, they were already afraid, before they saw Jesus coming. They did not recognize him, and what they saw absolutely terrified them. They did not imagine such a thing was possible. The Good News is our Lord can walk on water and still storms of many kinds. We would be wise to have a little more sense of terror when the Son of the living God comes towards us to transform our lives and world. Luther's Small Catechism begins its explanations with, "We are to fear and love God..." He will turn everything upside down.

Whatever is frightening you, remember Jesus is with you in all the storms of life. Jesus' words to the disciples are also words for you and me when we are afraid, tortured, and tormented by life. "Take heart, it is I; don't be afraid." Jesus says, "Don't be afraid...Come." Jesus comes after us in the storms of our life. "It is I; stop being afraid." It is a not a barking command of shame, but rather a comforting and powerful word of divine assurance. In the midst of this dangerous world, where there are really good reasons to be afraid, Jesus will come to save you no matter what, even if it means carrying a cross to Golgotha.

Peter normally captures our attention in this story. I want to keep the focus on Jesus in today's Gospel. Jesus says to Peter after he asks if he is the Lord, "Come." In addition to his expression of deep faith and then fear, one thing to learn from Peter is that we are not Jesus. We cannot walk on water. Testing Jesus or God to see if he is the Lord will lead to some kind of sinking experience. God is God...we are not. We are not Jesus. We are more like Peter sinking into the waves of fear in the winds of our life than we want to admit.

In my home church, a painting of this text dominates the front of the church as it fills the old style wooden altar. In Norwegian, it says, "Lord, save me." Jesus, who can walk on water, with his strong arm reaches out and grabs Peter's arm as he is sinking into the waves. He calls out, "Lord, save me!" and Jesus reaches out to him. Our God and Jesus our Lord are not focused on punishing, or he would have let him go. Instead Jesus loves and saves Peter with his strong and loving arm. God reaches out in love to save you and me with his strong arm when we are in trouble. When we are afraid, God reaches out in love even when we are getting it wrong. God loves you and me and sent Jesus to save us.

One of my favorite stories is about John Muir, the amazing black-and-white photographer who captured so many scenes in Yosemite and in the Northwest part of our country. He loved storms. He was known to climb up into the redwoods as a terrible storm would come tearing in from the ocean so he could experience the full force and great winds of a storm. He was crazy about storms.

I don't think Jesus loved storms that much. I know I don't. But our Gospel lets us know that Jesus had the power to walk on water to save his disciples and Peter. He was willing and continues to be willing to enter into the storms of life to save you and me. Jesus does whatever it takes to get to the other side to do the ministry and mission God is sending us to in our families, communities, and world. Jesus makes possible the mission and ministry of God on the other side of our history. Jesus knows how to still our fears and open our future. Jesus sends us again and again into new territory to love our neighbors in need.

As Jesus stilled the winds, the disciples worshiped him. "Truly you **are**...the Son of God." In the Gospel of Matthew this is the first place the disciples recognize Jesus as the Son of God and worthy of worship. In our assembly we will talk about God's Church, the ELCA, our synod, and your congregations, but we will not forget all of the church exists first to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to a world that is drowning. So the next time you are sinking, remember God is with you and will hear your call, "Lord, save me...save us."

We know this because Jesus is willing to face all the headwinds of life, evil, and death to set you and me free.