

Lectionary 19 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 13, 2017

Matthew 14:22-33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today is a good day. Any day that we get to sing the Navy Hymn is a good day. And that is our sending song today, at the end of worship. "*Eternal Father, Strong to Save.*"

It's a very fine hymn with a very interesting history. If you like the Internet, then you should check out the Wikipedia article. William Whiting, who wrote the words, wrote them for a young man, a student of his, who was about to cross the Atlantic Ocean and was terrified of being at sea. Whiting himself had nearly lost his life on a boat at sea. And so he was sympathetic. It's a pleasant surprise that a poem that was really written just for a friend rapidly was published in a hymn collection and inspired a great musical tune—*Melita*—and became the hymn for the navies on both sides of the Atlantic, the U.S. Navy and the United Kingdom's Royal Navy.

Our hymnal version is almost verbatim the original words. No stanzas have been added, no stanzas have been removed. For a song that has become so popular, it is a decidedly churchly hymn. It is, on its face, a hymn to the Holy Trinity. It's a very orderly prayer. It prays first to God the Father for the safety of those on the ocean. It next prays to God the Son for the safety of those on the ocean. Third, it prays to God the Holy Spirit for the safety of those on the ocean. And then in the final stanza, it asks the Trinity to protect all travelers so that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be eternally praised by choirs of voices on both land and sea. It has echoes of the psalms in its structure, but is based mainly on the gospel stories like the one we just read, and above all, on the creation story in Genesis. In a perfect gesture, the tune which was written to accompany this poem was named *Melita*, which is Malta, an island where the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. If you are looking for a hymn that is Christian, Christian, Christian, on the top, on the bottom, and on *all* the sides, then you've found it when you encounter *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*.

I've said this many times in this pulpit, but I will say it again. You and I, here in the 21st century, have no easy way to grasp how scary bodies of water were to the people who wrote the Bible. Rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans were simply terrifying. The closest thing that you and I have is outer space. Outer space is vast. You cannot survive there. It may be filled with monsters. And it is incomprehensibly big and old so big and old that we cannot imagine that it has boundaries or that it could have been created. THAT is what water was like for the people who wrote the Bible. Except for us, we aren't about to accidentally fall into outer space and die. It takes a vast amount of power and technology simply even to GET to outer space. So we're not likely to

directly experience it.

So when the hymn *Eternal Father, Strong to Save* says in the first stanza that the Creator appointed the limits of the oceans, that's a reference to Psalm 104. That God establishes the boundaries of the oceans is analogous to our saying that God created the Big Boom and knows the boundaries of the universe.

We have some knowledge of this. Even we desert dwellers have it drilled into us that we can lose control of our cars in six inches of fast moving water. I've been caught in a rip current in the Pacific Ocean, and I understand the power of water in nature. We know that waterboarding— a form of torture that creates the sensation of drowning— is so cruel that it is illegal. So deep in our bones, deep in our DNA, we have a very primitive fear of the water.

Yet, water is necessary to live. Before we are born, we sort of float in the womb. And we love baths and swimming pools and jacuzzis, most of us. So water is this very nurturing and life-giving thing, celebrated in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. But it is also dangerous and indifferent to human life, as the Bible abundantly illustrates in stories like the parting of the Red Sea and the death of Pharaoh's army in the un-parting of the Red Sea. And in the story of Noah. And in the story of Jonah. Water destroys and annihilates. And yet it gives life.

So the Bible is eager to demonstrate the God has control over water. And as the hymn makes clear, God the Father has mastery over the waters. God the Son has mastery over the waters. And God the Holy Spirit has mastery over the waters. And that is demonstrated in this gospel reading today in which Jesus is as untroubled by the sea storm as the sea storm is by the disciples in the boat.

The story today is intriguing because it is a Peter story. Matthew's gospel— the gospel we are journeying through this year— Matthew's gospel has a special focus upon Peter. And so although the other gospels talk about Jesus walking on water, and although the other gospels talk about Jesus calming the storm— only in Matthew do we get this compelling story of Peter. Stepping out of the boat. And beginning to walk. But then losing his nerve— being seized by fear— and beginning to sink.

Two weeks from now, two chapters from now, we reach the part of Matthew where Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, which is the center of Matthew's gospel, the pivot point in the story as Matthew intended. He's very focused on Peter. And Peter— who sort of represents all Christians— but in Matthew's gospel sort of represents church authorities as well— Peter is always sort of a leader, sort of an initiative-taker, but he is always flawed.

In the Roman Catholic Church, Peter is considered the first pope, the anchor of church authority, the leader of the leaders, the priest who is at the head of the priesthood. And this notion is based on Matthew's gospel where Jesus gives Peter his name— the Rock— (Not Dwayne Johnson) the Rock upon which Jesus will build a church. The great hidden theme of Matthew's gospel, the

great genius of its composition, is precisely about leadership in the Church. That leaders are important and we must follow them, and yet they are always flawed. And Jesus is always superior to the church's leadership. Matthew's gospel is a very comprehensive statement about leadership and authority. It is the only book of the Bible cited in our congregation's constitution because it is precisely concerned with the authority of leadership and the limitations of leadership.

So kind of as a component of his focus upon Peter, Matthew ends up giving us this wonderful story of wanting to obey Jesus, wanting to follow Jesus, but being overcome by fear, and then Jesus catching Peter by the hand— catching us by the hand— and pulling us into his safety. It's a very lovely and compelling story that invites us to meditate upon God and the fears which prevent us from doing and living as God intends.

So whether we are like that young man setting sail for America and being afraid to cross the ocean, or whether we are like Peter trying to follow Jesus, or whether we are like the disciples staying in the boat and trying to survive, or whatever you might be facing in your life or your work or your hopes: the message of Jesus in today's gospel speaks loudly and clearly: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Amen.