

Jesus Saves Me

Matthew 14:22-33

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

The morning air was crisp and fresh as we made our way down the marina's causeway. The harbor was bustling with charter vessels making ready for the day's catch. Mister Greene greeted us as we stepped aboard what appeared to us to be a formidable ark. As the boat made its way across Resurrection Bay for the open seas, the distant village of Seward, Alaska steadily shrank from sight. We too seemed to shrink as the twenty-mile journey out began to become a reality. The same ark we'd boarded at the marina now seemed to be a peanut shell bobbing along the great expanse behind and before. Being a flatlander from South Dakota only exaggerated the matter. I was completely reliant on Mister Greene, our illustrious captain, both for the hoped for catch and safe passage back to terra firma.

Last Sunday it was our Lord Jesus Himself whom we are told embarked and withdrew away from the pressing crowds of people. A boat was His apparent get-away and the sea was His inviting solace and peace for a few moments alone. This week it is the disciples' turn to get into the boat. Matthew tells us specifically that Jesus made them get into the boat and go before Him to the other side. As they venture out away from the Lord, He stays behind to dismiss the crowds and then retreat to a mountain by Himself for prayer. We can only imagine that these men were beat from a long day working among the crowds. The boat ride was just what they needed to unwind and spend some quality time together sharing personal thoughts of the day now past. The gentle waves therapeutically lull these men with rest, and as evening hastens on the boat by this time is a long way from shore.

Even if you don't care much for water and boats, this tranquil setting from the cares and occupations of this busy life is a welcome change. Everyone needs time away whether you are wet behind the ears or well advanced in years. The rugged disciples desperately need what all humanity is longing to have—some semblance of peace in the midst of tumult. You too have your own waves that beat against your respective boats. The effects of sin press hard and whip up troubled waters in every day life. Trials and sufferings are the way of the Christian life. Yours aren't the same as mine, nor are my personal hardships yours. But in a real sense we are all in the same boat when it comes to the consequences of our common life of sin. Escape from the world may come at times, but the relief is short lived. Those encumbered by

ailments that plague mind, body, and soul may know of tranquility, but peace is often the exception, not the norm. This side of heaven we are very often distant from the safe-shoals of resurrection bay. Cancers, heart disease, COVID, and other physical ailments are but symptoms of a bigger, deeper, more invasive problem. We are dying even while we live. Fear of the unknown and lingering doubts are common, human reactions to life lived in a battered and wind-whipped world.

So it is not surprising to us that Saint Peter's prayer is our daily prayer too. "Lord, save me," he cried out as the waves began to engulf and encompass him. Outside the safety of the boat, Peter is vulnerable and left to himself he doesn't stand a chance of surviving the storms of life. And that's true of us too. The waves of depression, anxiety, fear, and hopeless despair are relentless and determined to sink us in the deep. What began as a quiet, gentle boat ride across still waters doesn't in the least bit resemble the current, life-threatening and life-rendering dilemma of this gale we call sin. We are sure to perish, as sure as we know death is our appointed bitter end. And yet in the midst of our perishing, we cry out to the One who hears and reaches out His hand to save us from our sins.

It is the holy evangelist Matthew who reminds us today of what the angel of the Lord told Joseph by way of a dream. "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20b-21). And so He has! And so He will for you and me as we sink or swim in this life. Though far, far away from the land where even the ark seems small and tossed about, Jesus is ready and willing to save by the extending of His pierced and outstretched hands and the swift feet that make their way across the wind-swept seas.

This story and miracle concerns the Church and the baptized. Stories of boats and raging seas abound in the Bible. The most prominent is that of Noah and the Flood in the book of Genesis. There the flood waters abound upon the earth in righteous judgment against the sin of man and unbelief. Though the flood waters beat against the ark, God provides a safe way for Noah and his family to survive. He doesn't leave them treading water but rescues from sin and unbelief by way of water. Salvation through faith in the Lord's promise brought them in safety to dry ground. Elsewhere we read of God's mighty hand of deliverance at work for Israel. The Red Sea is parted, and the people cross on dry land. And it was no accident that the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River before entering the Promised Land. In addition, there is the account of Jonah and his being cast overboard into the raging sea only to be swallowed up by a great fish.

Today's Gospel account of the disciples riding the sea in a boat strikes a resonant cord with us. Through the waters of Holy Baptism the faithful are rescued from God's judgment and brought in safety to heavenly shores. This is why the Church has often been likened to a

ship, and the main assembly of the congregation is a gathering in the nave. No one enters the ship of the Church but through Baptism, which unites every disciple with the death and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. He alone is the Church's Head and Captain who guides her through the stormy seas of sin, temptation, persecution, suffering, doubt, unbelief, and death through His life-creating and saving Word.

While the wind and waves beat against the boat, Jesus is away praying. Matthew makes specific mention of this. At various significant times in Jesus' ministry, our Lord withdraws by Himself to pray. Time away in prayer is good and these times prepare us for the winds and waves of life in this world. But notice that Jesus doesn't only retreat and pray. He also comes quickly and deliberately among the disciples in their hour of greatest need. Walking on the sea is no big thing for Jesus. The ordinary fears and limitations we face as mortal men and women are not fears and limitation for Him. He needs no boat or proverbial paddle to make His way out to them. He needs no crutch or life saving measure to make His rescue safe. He has no fear of sinking to a deep and murky death whatsoever. Jesus isn't scared of the dark either. Light and dark are alike to Him.

In contrast to Jesus' watery walk, Peter is not long focused on Jesus before he is distracted and begins to sink. He saw the wind and was afraid even though Jesus was right there beside Him. What should have been a sure thing for Peter quickly dried up resulting in his perishing. So Peter does what all of us would have done given the gravity of the moment. He calls out in prayer. He cries out in desperation, "Lord, save me." That is our prayer today given the current state of affairs in an unpredictable sea of despair. The Hebrew name "Jesus" means "he saves." This is what Yeshua does by nature—He comes to save His people from their sins. And so immediately Jesus reaches out His hand and lays hold of a sinking friend. He stretches forth His arm of deliverance and saves even though Peter had displayed his unbelief and doubt in Jesus' ability to do so. The waves caught his eye and distracted his focus. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever wondered if Jesus is the "real deal" or merely a ghost conjured up by your own imagination?

We are quick to chide the blundering Peter for being "the one of little faith." After all, Jesus is right there in flesh and blood to see and touch and hear. It's not enough for the sinner who catches a glimpse of the treacherous waves. We chide him as we sit here safely in the house of God away from the temptations he faced. But remember that it was Peter alone who was willing to climb out of the boat and go where no man had gone before. He is so often given credit for his failure to have faith, but what faith he had to leave the boat in the first place. Are you and I willing to trust Jesus enough to get out of the boat? Are we willing to venture out beyond our comfort zones for the sake of the Gospel? It certainly is what Jesus expects of us when He says, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). And again our Lord tallies the cost of discipleship when He

says, “Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 10:37-39). So clearly Peter is to be commended even though he fails the test of faith. The words of our confession capture our dilemma: “We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.” Either way we are in the same boat—we need Jesus to come and save us.

Jesus is ready and able to save poor Peter and us. Fresh from the mountain of redemption where He is lifted up on the tree of the cross with pierced hands and pierced feet, Jesus immediately makes His way to you. He comes in the dark of your night, in times when the waves just won't stop pounding against the boat. He comes to speak to you in preaching and attaches Himself to bread and wine for your redemption. These means of grace are your life-line when everything around you is spinning out of control.

In the end, Jesus pulls Peter to safety and together they get back into the boat. Most impressively, the wind ceases. How else can it go on when Jesus is there? And those in the boat, whom Jesus had at the outset made to climb aboard for this test of faith, believed in Him. They worshipped Him, saying, “Truly You are the Son of God.” And that is our hope too now in this place and for all eternity. God be praised. Amen.