

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b  
Matthew 14:22-33

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
August 13, 2023

## **The Fisherman's Prayer**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm today is usually categorized as a historical psalm. It begins with a song of praise for God's mighty acts in the saving of Israel, and it recalls the story in Genesis of Joseph, hated by his half-brothers, sold as a slave, in fetters—Joseph could have wondered how anything good could come of this. But through God's providential hand, good did come. Through Joseph, the people of Israel were saved from famine. And God's eternal purposes were carried forward. Listen to these words from Psalm 105:1 through 6, 16 through 22, and 45b...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

Our Gospel Lesson today is about Jesus' walking on water, a story of faith and endurance. We find Peter as an enthusiastic disciple without staying power at a critical moment. Listen to these words from Matthew 14:22-33...

### *Sermon*

For Matthew, after the feeding of the multitude on the shores of the Sea of Galilee near Bethsaida, the focus shifts from the wilderness to the sea—from God's provision in the desert to God's deliverance through the waters. He says that

immediately Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee], while he dismissed the crowds (14:22),

as if to tell us that the disciples were reluctant, and that Jesus was urgently aware that they must go.

Jesus knew the common view of Messiahship: the Messiah was to lead a revolt against Rome and establish an earthly kingdom. But such a cause would leave Jewish and Roman hearts

unaltered. Jesus knew the futility of outward change when inward motives are unchanged. He feared that eyes would be turned toward man, instead of toward God. So he determined that the disciples must leave. He did not want them to get involved in the possibly dangerous situation that could develop with the crowd. Furthermore, he knew that he must leave and go up the mountain by himself to pray. Amid all the pressures of his ministry, Jesus finds the time and place to pray. To be alone with God. To speak with God. And to listen for God's word.

And there, alone on the mountain, Jesus recovered perspective, so that he came back from the mountain in the singleness of a heart intent only on God's will, and made new in God's strength. Again the sure Master of men and circumstance, our Gospel Lesson shows Jesus calming a storm. Likewise, in the mad rush and distraction of our lives Jesus bids *us* "Come apart and rest." In that word "rest" is the promise of true renewal. Prayer and rest are not for stagnation, but for restoration.

Jesus had told the disciples to get in the boat and go to the other side of the lake. The Sea of Galilee is, in fact, a lake. It is seven miles long, thirteen miles wide, only one hundred fifty feet deep at its deepest point, and there are bluffs on two sides of the lake. It is now known as Lake Genneserat and a sailor's delight, though prone to fast-shifting winds and sudden storms. That is just the situation in which Jesus and the disciples find themselves on the evening we just heard described in Matthew 14.

We now have a fairly clear picture of the boat in which they were traveling. For in 1986, during a severe drought in Northern Israel, when Lake Genneserat was low, members of a kibbutz (a communal settlement) at the northwest shore of the lake saw the timbers of what turned out to be a first century boat, just below the surface. Subsequently that boat was excavated and very carefully preserved. Twenty-six feet long and seven feet wide, such a boat

would have held about fifteen people. These boats had a round bottomed hull with neither a keel nor a center board for stability. So when a strong wind came up, the boats would have been buffeted by every wave and could have been easily swamped.

You may recall my story about years ago when I served as Stated Supply Pastor of the Lickville Church, there was a lake where I would occasionally go fishing. I had taken two of our sons there. We were out in a boat, and it was a late afternoon, when I saw dark clouds forming in the distance. I had let the two boys out on the bank and was going to just fish from the little boat for a few more minutes in a certain spot where I thought I saw movement in the water.. But before I knew it, a storm was right there upon us—rain, wind, thunder, and lightning. The wind was so strong that my efforts to paddle the boat were fruitless. The tempest would just have to blow me to the shore of its choosing, as it did. And once on the bank, I feared for the lightning. But wet and worn, I gratefully made it to shelter, and vowed that henceforth, on a lake, at the first sight of a storm I would not hesitate to get to safety.

Well, while the disciples were out in the boat, a storm developed. Not when they had embarked on some foolish enterprise of their own choosing, but “in the line of duty”—following Christ’s instructions. So it is that tempests can come at any time.

The lake, at the place suggested by the story, was perhaps only four or five miles wide; but the expanse was vast compared with the size of the boat.

Dear God, be good to me;  
Thy sea is so wide,  
And my boat is so small.

This brief prayer is known as the Breton Fisherman’s Prayer—a prayer of fishermen in northwest France. Someone tells of their first six months of worship at St. Luke the Physician Church in Gresham, Oregon:

I'm slowly finding my way through the liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer, the hymnal, [becoming acquainted with] the caring and gentle faces that make this place a sanctuary.

A cherished moment in the service comes for me when Reverend Jennifer Creswell leads us in prayer after the Gospel and before the sermon, "Dear Lord, be good to us. The sea is so wide, and our boat is so small." I had not heard this prayer before coming to St. Luke's. I am moved by the simplicity, desperation and trust it speaks all at once.

What storms beset the early church in the time of the Roman Emperor Nero! What storms beset Christians in the Mideast today, and even in the United States! What storms beset all people, even people of faith! Being a disciple is a risky business, but discipleship is exactly what God calls us to, with the assurance that when we answer his call in a leap of faith, we can count on the abiding and steady presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In the midst of the storm we can find his grace sufficient for all our needs.

The heart of this story in Matthew is the interchange of Jesus with Peter, and Peter's walking, sinking, and rescue. It comes between the initial sighting of Jesus and the dying down of the winds. First, we notice Peter's unusual request:

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Then when the command is spoken, "Come," Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk toward Jesus. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said:

Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learnt the meaning of faith....  
The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus.

What is clear from this passage is that we are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are to honor the call of Christ. Stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face any headwinds or never be filled with fear, but it is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us.

Well, as Peter is coming toward Jesus on the water, he becomes frightened by the wind, begins to sink, cries out to Jesus, and is rescued. This is not the story of the skeptic who habitually doubts, but the story of the faithful follower who becomes overwhelmed by surrounding circumstances, begins to lose nerve, but from Jesus finds a steadying, delivering hand. As Tommy Dorsey wrote in 1938:

Precious Lord, take my hand  
 Lead me on, let me stand  
 I am tired, I am weak, I am worn  
 Through the storm, through the night  
 Lead me on to the light  
 Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.

A storm can arise in an unforeseen development in our lives that throws the future into question—a matter of health; a matter of finances; a matter of temptation; a matter of relationships. Something that causes such waves to toss about our little boat.

So why did Peter's faith fail? Because even though he ventured forth in faith, he began to look at the storm rather than at Christ. When he saw the strong wind, he was afraid, even though Christ had said, "Come."

It is said that in the days of the great sailing vessels, when a new hand climbed the narrow rope ladder up to the crow's nest, the old hands would cry out, "Look up! Look up!" For if the lad looked down, he might become dizzy and fall. Faith is strong when its eyes are fixed on Christ. Peter's faith wavered as his eyes moved from Jesus to the storm.

Remember the refrain of the old hymn by Helen Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus":

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
 Look full in His wonderful face,  
 And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,  
 In the light of His glory and grace.

As we read in The Letter to the Hebrews:

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to  
Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1b-2a)

Our Gospel lesson ends with a final great and permanent truth. When Jesus got into the boat the wind ceased. The truth here is that wherever Christ is, in the midst of the wildest storm, there is a place of quiet rest. On the surface the sea may be raging, but deep below there is calm.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.