

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 13, 2017**

**1 Kings 19:9-18 • Psalm 85:8-13 • Romans 10:5-15 • Matthew 14:22-33**

In today's gospel reading, the disciples finally catch a break. After feeding the five thousand, Jesus does the thing the disciples were begging him to do: send the crowds away. And after Jesus and the disciples are left alone, Jesus goes off to get some time by himself, the disciples get in their boat to get some time to get a breather. To get away from the crowds for a little bit. And, to their credit, they do get away from the crowds. Way away. And they end up in the middle of the sea.

On one side of that sea is hunger, where Jesus just fed the five thousand. The kicker in that story, remember, is when Jesus asks the disciples what they have. And the disciples pull out five loaves of bread and two fish and say, "We have nothing." Why, Jesus suggests, are you telling me that you have nothing when you're showing me five loaves of bread and two fish?

On the other side of that sea is sickness. After today's reading, Jesus and the disciples will land at Gennesaret, where they will be greeted by a mob scene of people bringing their sick friends and family to see if Jesus can heal them. You leave hunger and you end up in sickness.

But today, the disciples find themselves somewhere between hunger and sickness. In the middle of the sea. For Jews like Jesus and the disciples, the sea is an image that's rich with meaning, and not always in a good way. In the beginning of Genesis, the spirit of God moves over the waters. Waters described as chaos. In the psalms, the sea comes back again and again. The depth of it. The size of it. If you want to understand the magnitude of God's power, the scriptures say, look at the sea. Uncontrollable. Unknowable. So great that only God could have power over it. When ancient Israelites went fishing, they would always stay within view of the shore. That's because they knew what the authors of the psalms knew, which is that when you lose sight of the shore, you realize the immensity of the seas. And you realize you could sail for hours in one direction and not realize you were going the wrong way. To lose sight of the shore is to become overwhelmed and disoriented.

But these, mind you, are no ordinary people in the boat. Many of the disciples are fishermen. People who knew how to ride out a storm. When we read today's gospel, many of us assume the disciples were afraid of the storm. But notice that Matthew never says that they're afraid. Tired? Maybe. Annoyed? Probably. But scared? Not so much. Actually, Matthew doesn't say they were afraid until they saw Jesus coming to them. For these fishermen, these disciples, stuck between sickness and hunger, in a great sea of uncertainty, the safest place to be is in the boat. Because you know boats. The sea may be rough, but things are going to be okay as long as you stay in the boat. As long as you stay in the boat, you are going to be protected.

Most of us have a boat. A thing in our lives that we think "as long as I hold on to this thing. As long as I stay inside of this boat, I'll be okay." For some of us, that boat is a relationship. A partnership or a friendship that we think will keep us safe from our worst fears. For others of us, that boat is a job. A profession that makes us feel needed. For most of us, that boat is a deeply held belief in how the world works. And as long as I stay in my boat with my boat's facts, no one can tell me I'm wrong. No man is an island, but everybody has their own boat.

Which is why it's funny that Peter gets such a bad rap in this story. Because the eleven other disciples are just hanging out in the boat. But Peter is the one who actually does something interesting when they see Jesus. Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Which is not the way you think the story is going to go. You think Peter is going to say, "Can I walk on the water? Can I do that thing that you're doing?" You would think that Peter is going to ask for permission. If you can do that, can I do that? But that's not what Peter does. No, Peter says, "Command me to come to you on the water."

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Peter acknowledges what most of us want deep down. Which is that the thing we want isn't permission. We live in a culture that is very permissive. Most of the time you don't need someone else's permission to do something or to be a certain way. That's good. But the thing that keeps most of us up at night isn't whether we have permission to do something. It's whether we have a calling to do something. It isn't whether it's possible for us to do something, it's whether what we do has any meaning. That's what Peter wants. What Peter wants isn't to know whether it's possible for him to walk on the water like Jesus, whether it's possible for him to walk into the fear and uncertainty the same way Jesus is. It isn't. He can't. What Peter wants is for Jesus to tell him that he should. What Peter wants, what all of us really want, is a calling.

So Jesus says, "Come." And Peter steps out of the boat and starts walking toward Jesus. And he walks. Walks over the water, walks over the uncertainty, walks over the chaos toward Jesus. And then he hears something. Feels something. The wind blowing in. The spray of the water on his ankles. And he becomes frightened. And he sinks into the water.

Which is not surprising. It's not surprising because you can't walk on water. You just can't. Because if you think that what Jesus is calling you into is a life that is free of any conflict, free of any confusion, free of any disappointment, free of any disillusionment that is going to keep you from having second thoughts on whether following Jesus is a good idea, then you're going to be in for a rude awakening. If you want a calling from Jesus, you'll get one, Jesus is full of callings. But finding the new life Jesus is leading you toward is going to mean stepping out of your boat. It's going to mean giving up the belief that your accomplishments, your relationship, your ideology, can protect to save you. It's very hard to follow Jesus if you don't get out of the boat.

And, as Peter learned, it's probably going to involve getting a little bit wet. It's going to involve leaning into uncertainty because you don't know where Jesus is sending you next. Last week, we talked about vocation. About how we offer our gifts to God, who uses them for the good of the world. But that's only half of the story. Because it's not just about what we have to offer. It's about what our neighborhood, our country, our world needs. Which means that our vocations, the ways we live out our faith in the world, change. The theologian Karl Barth once said that the thing that made theologians different from mathematicians and physicists, was that they have to start over every day. You have to start over every day because what God is doing, where God is calling you to, is always changing. Every day, you have to step out of that boat and find the next shore Jesus is leading you to.

Before Peter goes fully under, Jesus sticks his hand out and pulls him out of the water. And says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" One of the difficulties with the gospels is that they don't communicate anything about tone. If all you have is words then you only have part of what's going on. There's a lot that's left to interpretation. And you don't need to be some scholar to realize this. It's like when someone writes you an email that's written in all capital letters. The gospels give us meaning in words, but we have to fill in the tone in our heads. So the way most of us have been trained to read this is that Jesus is upset with Peter. Jesus is chastising Peter for not having more faith in him. And if that's the case, then why would you want to be like Peter? Why even try? Better to be like the other eleven disciples who don't try to get out of the boat and also don't get an earful from Jesus. Just go along and get along.

But what if instead of chiding Peter, Jesus is being playful with him? "Oh you of little faith..." What if Jesus is being a little sarcastic? Because didn't Jesus compare faith to a mustard seed? Something that starts out small but grows into something much bigger? And didn't Jesus say that faith was like a tiny pearl that is worth an immense treasure? Peter may be a person of little

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faith, but he's also someone with a growing faith. He's the one who asked for a calling. Who took the step out of the boat.

Peter may be a person of little faith, but aren't we all? Because there are some days when stepping out of the boat is easier than others. There are days when you know exactly where you're headed. Like you know exactly where to set off to. And there are some days you can feel the spray of the waves before you even dip a toe in the water.

Discipleship isn't about having the right amount of faith. There's not a minimum amount of faith that you need before you start discerning where God is calling you to. No, discipleship is about something else. It's about Jesus's invitation to come out of the boat. Even if you fall in, Jesus is there to grab you. And maybe razz you a little bit. And inviting you to do it all over again tomorrow.

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