

Sermon – Matthew 14:22-33  
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“Take Heart! I Am!”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Fear, it seems, is everywhere these days. A few days ago, I was afraid of a possible war with North Korea. No, it doesn't seem particularly likely, but I would prefer a calmer situation in our foreign affairs. And just when the prospect of nuclear war between nations has me afraid, things go wrong in our own backyard. Like you, I have watched the events of this weekend in Charlottesville with fear and horror, which I suppose was exactly the goal of racists and white supremacists who, in their own misguided fear, spout hatred and enact violence. If it's not one thing, it's another. If it's not the wind, it's the waves. Can we not find calm waters on which to sail our boats through this life?
2. Our story is not so different from the disciples in the boat. They had just witnessed their teacher, Jesus, feed the multitudes, turning paucity into abundance, meeting their deep hunger and, in the process, proclaiming his lordship. After that, though, things go bad in a hurry. While Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, the disciples get into their boat. But the boat, far from land and safety, is battered by the wind and waves kicked up by a storm. Fear sets in, amplified when the disciples see a figure walking toward them on the water. They cry out in terror, “It is a ghost!” They fail to perceive their Lord walking toward them, fail to see that the One who can save them is heading their way. I know the feeling! If it's not one thing, it's another? Who will save us from the storms of this world?

3. It is tempting to look to the episode that follows, that of Peter wanting to step out of the boat and walk on water, and to find there our hope for this world. Peter, in his delightful rashness, wants to do what Jesus does. Jesus invites Peter to join him, but Peter takes one step on to the water and is reminded of his own humanity. And if there's one thing I can safely say about humans, it's that we're not particularly good at walking on water. He notices the wind – how can't he? – and, fearfully, begins to sink. The temptation is in thinking that if Peter had just believed a little bit harder, he would have waltzed across the waves and into the arms of Jesus. If we just believed a little bit more, worked a little bit harder, maybe read self-help books and cultivated an inner lightness of being, we could walk on water, too. We could walk across the waves of this life and into a perfect tomorrow.
  
4. The point, however, is not about what we might be able to do. The point, as always, is about what Jesus does, about who Jesus is. The key to understanding this passage happens *before* Peter says, "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." The key is in Jesus' response to their assumption that he is a ghost. In response, Jesus cries out, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Now, I want to be careful here, because in a church like Grace you can't swing a cat without hitting six or seven pastors and few stray doctors of the church, so I'm not going to preen and posture like I'm an expert in Greek. But here I'll take my chances and say that the translation here gets it right but manages to completely miss the point. What Jesus says, quite simply, is, "Take heart; I Am!" As in, take heart, because I Am who I Am; I Am the same I Am who announced the divine presence to Moses in the form of the burning bush. Jesus specifically uses the very name of God to identify himself. "I Am," Jesus proclaims, and it is in his very being, his precise identity, that we are invited to take heart, to find courage, and to live not above but within the storms of this world. I Am, Jesus says, and that is enough, for he is with us.

5. So what do we do when we are tossed about by the wind and the waves.  
Well, when racists spout vitriol and engage in acts of terror, we condemn and renounce all such behavior, standing firmly with those they seek to oppress. To fail to do so is to abandon one calling of the church and to become silent enablers. But condemnation and renunciation, as necessary as such things are, are only a first step. We can no more conquer hate with condemnation than we can walk across Lake Michigan; rather, we are to place his cry upon our own lips: "Lord, save us." As those who have gone under the water in baptism and been raised up for the sake of the crucified and risen Lord, our task now is to reach out with the hand of Jesus and offer loving salvation to those whose sin seeks to swamp them as they try to pull others down with them. Yes, we speak words of honest judgment but only with the ultimate goal of sharing the saving love of Jesus Christ, the great I Am, the only hope we have as the storms rage around us. He alone has the power to save; his judgment upon sin is already pronounced and his word now is grace and life, and this word drives our work. We will not gloss over the sin of others, for Christ has not glossed over ours. Just so, we do not finally condemn others, for Christ has not condemned us. I Am has reached out his hand to us; may we reach out to others that they may know the fullness of life that no longer sees distinctions of white and black among God's people but welcomes us all through his saving hand.
  
6. As the storms roll in we struggle to see Jesus. But maybe, in faith, we don't have to see him to trust in his presence. You know, a funny thing happened to me the other week. I found myself cheering against the Royals in a baseball game. Well, not the Kansas City Royals, exactly, but the Royals of the three through five-year old Park District T-Ball league. I had to cheer against the Royals for the simple fact that they were playing the Diamondbacks, the team of Anders and Torsten. Torsten, bless his heart, has been afraid throughout most of the season, fearful of making a mistake. Of particular concern to him

was running the bases; the chaos of the game (and if you've even seen little boys play t-ball, you know what I'm talking about) seemed to paralyze him. So during a game a few weeks ago, I told him I'd run the bases with him if he would take his at-bat. Tentatively, he agreed. He put the ball in play and, side-by-side, we ran to first. He smiled up at me and we high-fived. I nonchalantly moved about ten feet away from him, into the outfield, and when the next batter hit a ground ball, ran parallel with him toward second. He glanced back at me and grinned. I backed up toward deep center and, upon the next hit, jogged along with him toward third, now a good twenty feet away from him. He didn't look back at me; at that point he seemed to trust that I was there. When the next hitter took his swing, Torsten bolted toward home while I stood still. He jumped onto home plate with glee and gave me the slightest look as I gave a big thumbs up and smiled the smile of a proud dad. One trip around the base paths was all it took to release him from his fear and begin to trust that I would be there for him, even if he no longer needed to see me right in front of his face.

7. While I doubt that he would put it in these exact terms, Torsten learned something about the life of faith that day. It's not always about seeing Jesus; it's about knowing he's there. It's not about walking on water toward home plate; it's about taking that first step toward first and knowing you're not alone. That's how we get through the storms of this life, reaching out our hands in the name of Jesus and pulling others up out of the baptismal flood and into newness of life, together. After all, in Christ we are already dead, and we are already alive. What could there possibly be for us to fear at this point? May we live with outstretched hands, working for justice and striving for peace and, most of all, always most of all, resting securely in the One whose hand is holding on to us tightly, the I Am who is the Son of God. Our eyes see wind and waves, chaos and hate and fear. Our hearts see Jesus, and he's got this. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.