



A WALK ON THE WATER

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

29 July Anno Domini 2012

Genesis 9:8-17, Ephesians 3:14-21, Mark 6:45-56

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After feeding the five thousand, Jesus dismissed the crowd. He went one way, His disciples went another way. He went off to the mountain to pray; they went off in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. This was the Lord's idea. He requested they leave late in the day knowing how the winds often kick up at night. He compelled them to get into that little boat. Did He know they would be out on the water in the wind, in the darkness and in peril?

A few years ago, a young man named Zac Sunderland became the first person under the age of 18 to complete a solo trip sailing around the world in a 36-foot sail boat. He endured storms, pirates and he nearly got crushed by some freighters. Try to imagine what it would be like out on the high seas all alone in a 36-foot sail boat. I've sailed in several sail boats over the years, rarely out of sight of land. It's an entirely different thing when it's just you in little boat and no land in sight. A 36' boat can seem awfully small and fragile especially in comparison to a violent sea.

Picture Noah and the ark, bobbing on the waves with his seven family members and an ark full of animals with no dry land in sight for nearly a year. I would imagine there some anxious moments on board with the wind blowing, the sea swelling and that boat creaking. There's nothing quite like being on the open water to remind us that we are creatures of the dust, of the earth. The sea is an alien space to us. It's a nice place to visit, perhaps, but we couldn't live there not very long. We belong to the dry land.

I use to get this sense when scuba diving. In places where divers like to go, the fish have come to associate divers with food. But in more remote places like the rocky caves of the California Coast, the fish and sea life kind of look at you with a surprised look, As if they were thinking, "What you are doing here? You don't belong here." On the water, we are only tourists, pilgrims, visitors and sometimes even invaders.

Yet strangely, there is something about water that is not foreign or alien to us. We are all born out of water, suspended in our mothers' wombs for nine months until her water breaks and we are born. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the whole earth was covered with water, the chaotic Deep, and the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters, and the creative Word declared over those chaotic waters and ordered was created, land and water were separated and life began.

It's all there in this miracle – the water, the darkness, the wind. Jesus walks on the water as though it were solid ground. He is the Lord of creation. **"The sea is His for He made it"** (Psalm 95:5). He is Master of the wind and the darkness. They do His bidding.

We need some historical-social context, the Sitz im leben where it sits in life. For there is a bit more going on here. The ancient people believe that Leviathan, the great sea monster, the dragon, lurked under the Deep, he was evil and death personified. When Jesus walks upon the water as though He is taking a stroll in the park, He is walking on the back of Leviathan, treading the devil

himself underfoot. He is the Lord of all and therefore the devil's Lord too, and the old evil foe knows he's no match. "He'd judged, the deed is done, one little word can fell him."

Jesus intended to pass them by. Mark takes note of that detail. Jesus did not intend to stop and get into the boat, but pass them by. "How's it going, boys? See 'ya on the other side!" What on earth is that about? I'm not sure, but I suspect that Jesus was teaching them, for He's always teaching them, that He goes first. He leads, they follow. Just like a shepherd. Even when they are rowing and rowing and getting nowhere against the wind, Jesus leads them as only Jesus can lead them. He goes before us through death to resurrection, bringing us along with Him. We are powerless against the chaotic forces that threaten us, but not Jesus. He is the Lord of life, the Lord of all creation, He's the Word. With Him the darkness is no threat, the wind obeys His command, the chaotic waters stand firm under His feet.

They thought they were seeing a phantom, a ghost. Superstitions abound, even today. Some people thought that water spirits came out at night signaling disaster. The mind can play tricks on you at night on the water. They were terrified, scared literally out of their wits. Jesus changes His plans terminating His object lesson and comforts them. "Didn't mean to scare you, boys. Have some courage. It's me. Don't be afraid." Or to translate it literally – Have courage. I AM. Fear not.

He got into the boat with them, and the wind died. The One who is the great I AM gets into their boat, and they are safe. They would have been safe anyway, but they didn't trust that. Not yet. They didn't fully understand about the multiplied loaves and what it meant. Their hearts were stubborn, slow to believe and hardened, they were a lot like we are, quick to panic, slow to trust and sometimes stubborn to believe.

What happens when you find yourself in the choppy waters of life with the wind in your face at three in the morning? Will a Jesus walking on the water bring you comfort? Do you really think so? Or will you scream in panic the way those disciples did imagining you are seeing a ghost? Probably!

Here's the point. For all the wonderful things the miracle reveals about Jesus, how He is the Lord of creation, the conqueror of the chaos, the One who tramples Leviathan under His feet, the One who has Lordship over the sea and the wind, for all that awesome display of sheer divine power, there's still no comfort, no confidence, no hope, no faith. Now you see why faith can't be based on miracles alone. Even the disciples, who were eyewitnesses to more miracles than you or I could ever expect to see in a hundred lifetimes, were slow to believe! This is one of the most amazing things you can gain from the Gospels. How often have you thought, "If I were there with the disciples, I would have believed! I wouldn't have been so dense, so slow to believe, so hardened of heart. Not me!" Have you ever thought that way? I have! (raising my hand).

Oh yeah? Think of how easily we fall into doubt, disbelief and panic. I do! It takes a lot less than a little boat on the water at the fourth watch of the night. The slightest perturbation in our peace and it's as though we have no God, no salvation, so hope of eternal life, nothing. That's the old Adam at work in us. It's the inner sinner of ours that doesn't take God at His Word or trust that He knows what's going on. And we think, somehow, that a little divine muscle exerted in our general direction once and a while would fill us with faith.

Jesus gets in the boat with them. The wind ceases without a word. They are astonished and confused. They don't understand. They can't connect the dots, the loaves and fishes, the wind and

waves and Jesus walking on the water. They can't see it. This Jesus whom they are following is the eternal Word, God in the Flesh come to save them. But who can blame them? Who could see it? Luther explains this in the Small Catechism: *"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him."* No matter how many miracles I may see or experience in my own life, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit working through the Word and Sacraments I couldn't believe, I wouldn't trust Jesus, and neither would you.

It's nice to hear and know about Jesus walking on the water in the wind at three in the morning. It's saving to know Jesus walking on the water of your Baptism with the Spirit of God blowing over those baptismal waters of the font. Walking on the sea, Jesus reveals Himself to be Lord of all Creation; in the water of Baptism, He reveals Himself to be your Lord and Savior. That's where the chaos of sin and death comes to an end; that's where our fears are calmed and our life restored. That's where the new creation by water and Spirit happens, where we are born anew from above in a birth that leads to life instead of death. Baptism is our little lifeboat, our ark on the water with Jesus right there with us, holding us in His death, raising us in His life, holding our lives in a way we cannot.

Our lives as Christians, as baptized believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, is a life of continual unfolding and growth in what Jesus has done for us who are already in Jesus. Just as the disciples were "works in progress," so we too are always growing into who we are in Jesus and who Jesus is for us. And there will be those times when the Lord sends you off in your little boat and He'll let you row with all your might against the wind and it will seem that He has left you alone in the dark. And it's for no other reason than to strengthen that faith that His Spirit has created in you, to work that trust in His promises so that you might grow in faith, in knowledge, in love, in hope, in patient endurance and in character.

Paul's prayer for the Christians of Ephesus shows this nicely. These are believers for whom Paul is praying, believers just like you and me. His words can easily be heard as praying for you. Listen carefully to his words again as I read this prayer: ***"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. To Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at His work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever"***. In Jesus holy name, amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus, AMEN!