

**Sunday, August 9, 2026**  
**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14A)**  
Matthew 14.22-33  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“Weathering Storms”**

I don't know about you, but today's Gospel lesson could be an analogy for my life. Not the entirety of life, but definitely certain moments. Those stormy moments when it feels like progress is inhibited as if by howling winds, when it feels like being battered by angry waves. Those moments when, despite our determination, we find ourselves suddenly swallowed up in the chaos swirling around us. Yet, at the same time, the Gospel also provides a model for how to weather such storms.

Today's Gospel scene takes place immediately after the feeding of the five thousand plus that we discussed last week. Jesus is wiped out after a long day of preaching and teaching, of healing and feeding. And he recognizes that the disciples are, as well. Jesus needs a little time for self-care. For him, that was time away from other people—including the Twelve—to have some quality time with God. Time away for some deep, regenerative prayer. To meet both his needs and those of the disciples, he sends them away so they can do what they need to take care of themselves. He puts them in a boat, presumably to sail across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum, their home base. Where they can get a good meal, see their families, and sleep in their own beds for a change.

Unfortunately, Mother Nature has other ideas. While they are en route, a storm whips up unexpectedly. Which, actually, is not that unusual. The Sea of Galilee is notorious for being very unpredictable. There is something about its location and geography that makes for erratic weather patterns. Calm one moment, and then all of a sudden, a storm whips up. While the distance the disciples had to sail was really not all that far, the unexpected storm makes progress very difficult. Such that by early morning, they are still not home, stuck in the middle of a storm. Newly recharged from a night spent in prayer and meditation, Jesus comes to the rescue.

We are told that when the disciples see this figure walking across the water, they are terrified. Not that they are terrified of the storm. But this unknown figure is the real cause. In actuality, it does make sense that they are not all that terrified by the storm—many of them are fishermen. They have been in storms before. As noted, storms are just a fact of life on the Sea of Galilee. Something they take in stride. In fact, earlier in Matthew's Gospel the disciples are in another boat, that time with Jesus asleep in the back, when a storm whips up. No, they are not terrified by the storm. They are terrified by the unexpected appearance of what looks to be Jesus. Some presume the figure to be a ghost. After all, how could Jesus be walking on the stormy water? Not possible. Surely, it is some malevolent spirit coming after them by pretending to be Jesus. Surely this is evil magic at work.

Okay, so maybe the disciples were also at least a little frightened by the storm, which is messing with their minds, causing them to spin out of control. Fear of storm and fear of this unknown

figure being connected. But the distinction made in the Gospel account is an important one, even as the fears may actually be linked.

While seemingly fantastical and irrational to our way of thinking, there was an underlying association between water and evil forces. In Hebrew thought, there was something metaphysical about the threat water posed to human life. Not just because they were in a desert area with little water. Remember the waters that covered the face of the deep at the time of Creation: the chaos that needed to be tamed to make way for what God created. For what God declared to be good. Remember the waters of the flood, wiping out the entirety of a corrupted world. This was part of their worldview. According to theologian Karl Barth, water, particularly in the creation story, is “the principle which, in its abundance and power is absolutely opposed to God’s creation;” which becomes “representative of all the evil powers which oppress and resist the salvation intended for the people of Israel.”<sup>1</sup> And not just in the stories of creation and re-creation, but even in significant moments in the history of the people: their deliverance from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea, and the crossing of the swollen waters of the River Jordan to enter the Promised Land. In all cases, God taming violent waters to save his chosen people. And now, here, Jesus walks across the stormy waters to save the Twelve. Jesus is taking on a role that, in their worldview, is reserved for God and God alone. Exercising command over stormy waters to bring salvation.

As if to affirm that role, as well as to reassure the disciples, fearful in the midst of the chaos, Jesus calls out to them, “Take heart, it is I.” Now that’s a loaded statement to the ears of the disciples. “It is I.” Virtually identical to “I AM”—the Divine name first delivered to Moses at the burning bush, when he asked God for his name. In response, God says, “I AM WHO I AM.” And then tells Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’ (Ex 3.14). Now uttering the words “It is I, I am” in and of itself would not indicate anything other than affirmation of one’s presence. But combined with Jesus’ unnatural, seemingly divine ability to command the waters of chaos, to walk on those stormy waves, would have been a powerful message to the disciples. One that Peter, at least, seems to get. In his recognition, Peter then cries out to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you . . .” A test of Jesus’ identity? Perhaps. Although, whether intentional or not, in calling him Lord, Peter is acknowledging Jesus’ divinity. An acknowledgment that is substantiated when, a few moments later, Jesus tames the chaos of these waters, causing the winds to cease and the waters to be stilled.

In response to Peter’s request of Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water,” Jesus bids him, “Come.” “So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.” Look at you, Peter. Walking on water, just like Jesus. You go! “But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and [began] to sink.” Peter became overwhelmed. He got in over his head, literally. Beginning to panic, he cried out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” Which Jesus does. Reaching out and taking him by the hand and helping him back into the boat.

After saving Peter, Jesus says to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” We need to be careful here. We don’t know what Jesus’ tone was. And how these words are delivered makes all the difference in their intended meaning. Was he harsh in his delivery, serving as a way of chastising Peter? Or was he perhaps a little more playful in his tone? The delivery being more of

an implied “Peter, Peter, Peter. Have you learned nothing in your time with me? Why did you doubt who I am? Why did you doubt yourself?” I like to think that it was more the latter. Jesus’ way of giving Peter a hard time for thinking he could actually walk on water. “Silly Peter, what were you thinking?”

Even if he was giving Peter a hard time, a gentle ribbing among friends, I don’t know that Peter actually doubted, that he lacked faith. The fact that he says to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” implies that he has every faith in Jesus. Faith that if Jesus commands him to do something, he will be able to do it. Even walk on water. And if you notice, Peter is successful. At first. He didn’t step out of the boat and immediately sink like a stone. No, we are told, “Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.” So what happened? He was doing so well. Both in the faith department and in the walking on water department. Matthew tells us what happened. “But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and [began] to sink.” When he noticed the strong wind. Peter did not lack faith. Peter did not doubt. Rather, Peter became distracted by the chaos that was raging around him: the wind, the waves. Becoming distracted was his undoing, not lack of faith.

In getting out of the boat, and trying to walk on water, Peter is seeking to imitate Jesus. Which, if anything, indicates profound faith on his part. And when he began to sink beneath the waves, his faith continued. He didn’t flounder. Immediately, “He cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” Even in being distracted by the chaos of the storm, with his primitive brain—the part focused on survival and self-preservation—kicking in, he continues to have faith that if anyone could save him in this situation it is Jesus. No lack of faith here. No doubt here.

Hopefully the lesson for us, the model for how we deal with those stormy periods in our own lives, be they storms in our individual lives or in our lives as a community or as a society, is becoming apparent. Stormy times are going to happen. That is just a fact of life. Just as unexpected storms are a reality on the Sea of Galilee. They will happen, no matter what we do. So, when we do find ourselves in those stormy situations, particularly the unexpected ones, we are reminded to not become distracted by the chaos but to remain focused on the One who is the center of our life and being. Recognizing that Jesus comes to us in unexpected ways. Just as he came to the disciples walking on water. And when he does come to us and calls us to “Come” and follow in his path, that we be willing to step out in faith, even when the waters are troubled. Trusting that he is there with us, supporting us, and guiding us, particularly when we are called to do the seemingly impossible, such as walking on water. All the while, maintaining our focus on the One who reaches out his hand to us. For it is when we become distracted by the chaos swirling around us, when we become focused on the chaos instead of focusing on Christ, that is when we begin to feel overwhelmed, that we feel in over our heads, that we feel we are in danger of slipping beneath the waves.

I’m certainly not suggesting that even when we stay focused on Jesus, that we will be miraculously immune from distractions, immune from the chaos that periodically rages around us. Even Peter, focused on Jesus and able to walk even a few steps on water, got distracted. But when we do become distracted, when we become overwhelmed by the chaos, we can follow

Peter's lead. To call out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" Trusting, knowing, that he will be there to reach out his hand and help us back into the boat.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Bart, *Church Dogmatics*, cited in Iwan Russell-Jones, "Proper 14, Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 334.