

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have never owned a boat of any sort...not even a plastic blow-up thing. The only time I ever enjoyed a boat was when I was either water skiing behind one or white-water rafting in one. My experiences in a canoe are mixed like the many jokes I've heard about them. I've heard that the best two days of owning a boat are the day you buy it and the day you sell it. I have no desire to board a boat, rather a ship that stands roughly the equivalent of a 20-25 story building and contains about 12 to 20 decks and measure 120 to 200 feet above the waterline...and has absolutely NO solid foundation to be anchored into. We're talking about a boat that is taller than the Griest Building in Lancaster, which is only 14 stories tall, floating on the water. They tell me..."Oh, Mark, you don't even know you're moving! that is till the storms kick up, then you know you are on a boat."

Peter and the disciples know they are in a boat; they are in a rickety little boat that is being battered by the wind and the waves and they are terrified. I have to say, I don't blame them, I too would be frightened and wanting to be saved. But more than a boat on the water, the Gospel today reminds us that our faith at times, might be like a rickety little boat that gets tossed about in a storm. But our faith is never shipwrecked.

Today in our Gospel we have a situation with the disciples in a boat that's in a storm. This is the second time in Matthew's Gospel that we find the disciples in a boat on the water that is being tossed about by the wind and the waves. Both stories seem to evoke a sense of salvation and these stories about a boat in the storm seem to be here before us to get us thinking about salvation, what salvation is, and what it really means?

By definition salvation is the preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss. We define salvation as a source or means by which one is saved from harm, ruin, or loss. The theological definition as Christians is that we believe salvation to be deliverance from sin and its consequences that is brought about by faith in Jesus Christ. But our understanding about salvation is framed in a linear understanding. In other words, salvation *as we know it* and understand it to be, comes after we die. Salvation as we know it and understand it is what "saves" us from hell. We speak of salvation as "being saved," "getting saved," or "receiving our reward when we die." There are those "good" Christian souls who believe that salvation is my reward for being "good"...and by being "good" I am referring to those who can point out the sins of others and proclaim that those sinners will be condemned to hell but their salvation is secured in their self-righteousness or their goodness.

No matter how we define or understand salvation, all professing Christians want salvation...we want that "thing" that says when we leave this life we are in for a better life. However, Luther does NOT look at salvation from a linear perspective. Luther explained that salvation is not something yet to come, it is now, in the justification already complete through our faith and this is what we see in our Gospel lesson today.

When we think of the disciples in a boat that is being tossed about by a storm, we usually mix up two different stories in Matthew in our confusion. However, there are significant differences that leads to different meanings and intentions about these stories. Listen to the first story from chapter

8 and as I read this follow along with our Gospel lesson today and try to notice the differences. From chapter 8:

²³ Then [Jesus] got into the boat and his disciples followed him. ²⁴ Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵ The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" ²⁶ He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. (Matthew 8:23-26)

Today in our lesson we hear that Jesus *makes* the disciples get into the boat. Unlike the story I just read, where the disciples "follow" Jesus into the boat. Today's story is the first time that the disciples are sent out by themselves and are NOT with Jesus. However, in the chapter 8 story, Jesus is in the boat with the disciples. Today's Gospel says that Jesus sends the disciples out alone by making them get into the boat to go to the other side without him. Our translation today glosses this over. From the Greek, Jesus *immediately forces* them into the boat. From the Greek it informs us that Jesus literally took them by the arm and forces them into the boat. Jesus does NOT get into the boat he heads up the mountain to pray by himself for the first time in this Gospel. As the boat heads off into the water evening rolls around and we hear that the disciples are battling the wind and the waves.

From dusk to dawn the disciples battle a storm. I used to be confused as to why fishermen would have a problem with a storm on the sea because I'm sure they have dealt with a many of storms in their profession. But as I parsed this story from the Greek, I found that this was not an ordinary storm...the boat was tortured by the wind and the waves. The word used in this passage to describe the storm is the same word used to describe demonic torment. The boat is more than tossed about, this word is more violent. The boat is violently tormented by the sea all night long. This storm will exhaust even the most experienced fishermen of every resource they have to battle it. The disciples are spent; it appears that their strategies are failing and they are defeated and in despair and they become terrified.

I get a feeling that the duration of this storm in this story before us gets lost or is over shadowed by Jesus, walking on the water. However, when the disciples set out in the boat it is not quite dark, but by evening when they are far away from land, the storm hits. I do not know why the English translation edits out the specifics of time. From the Greek it says this:

²⁵ Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. (Matt 14:25)

The fourth watch of the night is from 3:00 – 6:00 am, giving a clearer sense of the time that has elapsed from the time they were forced into the boat and set out to cross over to the other side.

We see today in our Gospel that the wind and the waves all but defeat the disciples and probably their boat, but Jesus comes out to them on the water amidst the storm. This is when we hear that Peter's faith is distracted by what is going on around him. But there is an interesting exchange between Jesus and Peter. Peter asks Jesus to prove himself by asking to command him to come to him on the water. It is in this exchange that I believe we find ourselves in Peter's shoes. We want our faith to work for us in our time of need, even when we find ourselves distracted by the things that are going on around us in our lives. Peter only shows how immature his faith is by asking Jesus to call him out of the boat. We literally want our faith to command our actions, even as our

dwindling faith allows us to step out of our troubles and recognize our “little faith” as Jesus refers to it. Does this mean then if Peter’s faith was larger, he would not have sunk at all?

From the Greek, “little faith” is not two words it is one and that one word really has nothing at all to do with size. As a matter of fact, from the resource I used to parse this Greek out it indicated that it infrequently means “little.” Jesus uses this expression four times and it is only used in this Gospel. We hear Jesus in other Gospels saying, “have you no faith,” and “where is your faith.” But by little faith Jesus is referring to the maturity of one’s faith. We can say that Peter’s faith is taking “baby” steps and stumbling when confronted by the circumstances. Perhaps ours does too at times.

So, what does this all mean for us sitting here in our nave, in our ship we call St. Paul Lutheran Church? If you remember last week, we were dealing with the solitude we seek when confronted with tragedy or the solitude we seek to protect our feelings, or the solitude we seek to let our emotions out freely and safely. Or the solitude we seek in our spiritual poverty to argue or rebuke or command God to act according to our will...as if that could actually happen. The point to the solitude last week was to show us that Jesus knows first-hand about that solitude, he sought it himself. He experienced it himself. And just as we witnessed Jesus in that human emotion that seeks solitude, today we see that Jesus comes to us and is most present with us not only in the quiet solitude of our lives, but also, in the roar of the storms that batter our lives. Jesus comes to us and extends mercy to us who are tossed, tormented, and beaten down by the violent rough waves that crash against the circumstances of our lives.

We see in this story today that our faith, no matter how mature, no matter how big or how small we see it, our faith allows us to step away from the boat load of disputes, fear, pettiness, hypocrisy, divisiveness, and the hatred that violently batters our lives, to step away and see Jesus Christ with us reaching out to us when the things around us distract our faith and cause us to doubt. But while the storms of our lives distract us, cause us to doubt, no matter what we face, it does not distract Jesus from reaching us. Jesus is just as St Paul tells us today in our second lesson, is near us.

Jesus sends the disciples out onto the water without him. And as the boat begins to get tossed about, we see that it is similar to what we face each and every day with our lives...the disciples know that Jesus is left on the shore and we sit here today knowing that Jesus has been left back in our history, but the presence of Jesus is made known in the salvation that comes to us today in Word and in Sacrament.

In our lesson today, we hear that Jesus does NOT command the wind and the waves to be calm. Jesus and Peter simply get back into that boat of salvation and the wind ceased. Perhaps the wind ceases for us knowing that Jesus is here with us also. Notice that Jesus does not remove the disciples from the boat or the water, he is simply present with them in the boat on the water. Likewise, Jesus does not show up today with a better boat or a better life, nor does he remove us from our existing situation, he shows up with the power to withstand and conquer the chaos and disorder of our lives with the salvation that is manifested in His presence.

And in the midst of this story today we see that we do not need a faith that enables us to walk on water or to conquer the storms that rage around us, all we need is a faith that enables us to see that

God's salvation comes to us in the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. Today we are not being challenged in order to test our faith, rather we are being shown that Christ is present when our faith is tested and challenged. Faith is not just a book that tells us about it, it is not a building that houses it, nor is faith the statues and icons that evoke it, faith is within us and enables us to see that Jesus Christ is God's power of salvation and mercy that is with us always in every situation and is made real in the boat that is this community of faith as it makes its way through the storms of our lives.

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