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Matthew 14:22-33

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

And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.(Matthew 14:26, KJV)

One of the sweetest tributes to a Christian I have ever heard concerned my great predecessor, Pastor Raymond Schulze. The beautiful thing said of him was that he simply believed that Jesus is real and that Jesus matters above all else: "It is all about Jesus," Ray firmly believed. He believed the story of Jesus whole, lock, stock, and barrel.

This is a sermon about faith like that: faith that takes Jesus to be real — indeed more factual than anything else in life. That's what I'm talking about: faith that takes Jesus to be more substantial than all the storms of life surrounding us. Imagine going through life equipped like that, believing that Jesus is real and that he matters most of all!

Still, storms do surround us and batter us, and they are real too — storms of trouble, storms of doubt, storms of regret, storms of temptation, even storms of wind and wave. Take the disciples in this morning's Gospel story, for example. When the disciples were laboring in the wee hours, and their ship was being tossed by the waves and the wind was contrary, the excitement and the danger of their circumstances were real to them. The ache in their muscles, the salt spray in their faces, and the worrisome water collecting in the boat: these things were all very real to men accustomed to and respectful of the sea. Indeed, at that moment, all these nautical things were more real to them than Jesus walking on the water, who seemed to them to be a ghost.

No wonder about that, in a way. Who ever heard of a man walking on the liquid waves? Our text says that when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. There is no mention of them being frightened of the storm, for a storm is a natural thing and many of the disciples were fishermen, accustomed to storms on the sea. They knew what to do. They knew how to contend with a storm. But this sight undid them: They saw their Master walking on the sea, and they supposed him to be a ghost.

The adventure of Christian life is to not do that: Do not suppose Jesus to be less real than the storms around you.

Why were the disciples afraid when they saw Jesus walking on the water? Because they imagine him to be in a place where it should be impossible for him to be. They imagined that they were alone, that Jesus was off on a mountain somewhere, lost in prayer, and they were left to their own devices in a boat on a stormy sea. They could not credit that Jesus could be with them in such circumstances. But the truth is, there is no place in your life where Jesus cannot be. If he must walk upon the watery waves to be with you, then water might as well become a lovely cobblestone sidewalk for him, for he means to be with you. Do not be discouraged. Do not imagine Jesus to be lost in prayer up there in heaven, while you must contend against the storms of life alone, for Jesus is resolved to be where you are, especially where you are in trouble.

Last evening I took the sacrament to our member Lisa Roberts at Roosevelt Hospital on the West Side. She had been faint and the physicians at the hospital decided to keep

her for observation over night. I went over this nautical story with her, about Jesus being with his disciples even in that impossible situation, for Jesus is more real than any impossible situation. And Lisa looked around at her hospital room and all the apparatus and smiled Amen. My Lord Jesus is a great God, greater than life's hardships and mysteries. They are real, but he is even more so.

Peter, bless him, asks Jesus to bid him to come unto Jesus upon the water, and Jesus says, come. Then, to my mind, the story of our human race reaches a kind of summit, for an ordinary man like you and me walks upon the water. His eye is upon Jesus. He sets all else aside — all notions of the ordinary course of things and all experience with the submerging power of water. He sets those things aside in favor of keeping his eye on his Saviour. But then, his eyes slip away from Jesus to the waves, which are boisterous, and he begins to sink. The wind and the waves have become more real to him than Jesus. They have more substance than our Lord. And in this way, Peter does himself harm. When his eye swept to boisterous waves, Peter sank. He needed then to be rescued by Someone even more real than the waves.

Earlier in St. Matthew's Gospel, we heard another nautical story — the one where Jesus commanded the wind and the waves to be still, and it was so. The conclusion of that story took the form of a question. It was an awestruck question in the minds of the disciples:

²⁶And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. ²⁷But the men marvelled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!(Matthew 8:26-27, KJV)

Now, we receive an answer to this question. When Jesus catches Peter and delivers both of them into the boat, then, at last, comes peace and comes understanding about what manner of man is this Jesus:

³²And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. ³³Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.

Are our sins more real to us than Jesus, the Son of God? One of the essential parts of the private confession liturgy is the question to the penitent about what the penitent believes:

P Do you believe that the word of forgiveness I speak to you comes from God himself?

R Yes, I believe.

Well, *if* the penitent believes such a thing, then a wonderful world opens up for that one: the world of forgiveness and innocence. Then, the benediction at the close of the liturgy speaks the beautiful truth:

P Blessed are those whose sins have been forgiven, whose evil deeds have been forgotten. Rejoice in the Lord, and go in peace.

But if the penitent believes in the sin he or she has committed more than in Jesus, then the penitent deprives himself, deprives herself of the consolation due. If the sin is horrifying, but Jesus and his forgiveness are spectral and ghostly, then the penitent does not receive the comfort the Lord desires. If Jesus forgives sin, who are we or any one in our life, to gainsay that?

Likewise with our temptations: If their allure and false promises are more real to us than Jesus, then we let ourselves in for trouble. When discussing baptism with folks, I never weary of telling the story of how baptism was performed in the early church during the Easter Vigil — how the one being baptized stood up, faced west, shook his fist, shook her fist at the darkness, and shouted out, “Satan, I reject you and all your false promises and all your false ways!”

Again, the challenge and the fun of the Christian life is to count Jesus more real than the allure of the temptations. Booze promises things. Jesus promises better things, and his promises are more trustworthy.

And now we must speak of the way of the Cross. If Jesus is able to still the storms of life, why does he not do so immediately? Why are we still battered by storms of trouble, storms of regret, and storms of temptation, if he is able to still the storms?

Let’s begin to think about this by remembering the story of Jesus and the kind of life he actually lived when he was young and full of hope, like many of you are. The kinds of things we know all too much -- disappointments, disloyalties, rejections, prayer answered very differently from what we had hoped -- these were the day-to-day things of the life of our Lord. He received some kindness, especially from Mary, Martha, and Lazareth, and I bet he was able to take some pleasure from the company of his disciples, yet the New Testament emphasizes that by and large, his disciples were a disappointment to him.

The most remarkable thing about Jesus in the Bible is that he pressed on. He is not remarkable for his success, but for his pressing on. He was a devout Jew, who prayed to the God of Israel and continued faithful to that God even to the Cross.

The Gospel is that this One is risen. And this means that we have someone who knows by experience the sorrows of our life. To make things better for you and me and for everyone is why Jesus goes on working.

Apparently, building the kingdom is hard work. Sin, death, and the devil are formidable enemies. They are strong. Jesus has been working at the kingdom for two thousand years now, along with the help of the Christians like you and me. His prayers continue. Indeed, he is called the Great Intercessor. Still the kingdom has not yet come.

So, when we ask, How can Jesus permit such disappointments on earth? we are asking about the very heartaches that Jesus has been suffering and fighting to overcome for a very long time now.

More and more it looks to me that our Maker is unwilling to perfect his creation apart from us. His creation is assaulted daily by sin, death, and the devil, and probably would have been lost by now if not for this Jesus who stubbornly fights on. The good news is that our Maker has raised Jesus from the dead to fight on all the way to victory. My theory is that we should lend a hand to the fight as best we can.

Life has its setbacks and disappointments, whether Jesus is risen or not. Yet he is risen, and so those setbacks are not the final word for us. One of the strange teachings of Luther, but one which I think is true, is that the good thing about the Gospel is that it tells us that we have a Lord and that our Lord is Jesus. Ordinarily, having a lord is not such a great thing. Most of us would rather *be* a lord than *have* a lord. But in this battle against

sin, death, and devil, which is so very large and important, it is good that we have a lord, and that he is Jesus. Jesus is the best man this world has ever known.

So, if you wake up some morning discouraged and troubled about how much is wrong with this world, I think that is exactly how Jesus is waking up too. But he presses on. We can count on him to press on today. And I hope to help him as best I can.

Our Saviour is the Man of the Cross. He was rejected, scorned, and crucified. That is the kind of lord we have: one who was rejected, scorned, and crucified, but never gave up. However lonely or discouraged you feel, Jesus has been there, and worse, yet he never gives up.

When I say that Jesus is more real than the storms of life, I mean that those storms will pass, but he will not, and that this is good news. In this morning's Gospel story, the final victory of Jesus is signified by the stilling of the storm on the sea. Jesus joins his disciples in the boat, the sea becomes calm again. When this happens, the disciples worship him and declare that he is the Son of God, which is true, and which means that we fight with a mighty Saviour at our side.

You and I are baptized, or are urged to be baptized. To be baptized means that Jesus has called you to be one of his disciples and co-workers. Jesus called fisherman and tax collectors to be his disciples. He did not call geniuses nor saints. He called ordinary people, and in walking with him, they became better.

Jesus is the most real person on the face of this earth and the most real factor in all reality. Oh! that he might be even more real to us in the face of life storms. We shall indeed weather those storms through the grace and merit of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.