In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This evening we begin our Lenten series of midweek sermons. This series of sermons is a continuation of what Pastor Fryer and I did last year, where we preached on Old Testament stories that the people of Immanuel had asked us to. This year, we are preaching on stories from the Gospels that you asked us to preach on. I do not say that we are this Lent preaching on stories about Jesus, because the Old Testament stories are about Jesus just as much as the stories of the Gospels.

We have just heard the story of Jesus walking on the water. This story almost begs us to understand its meaning at two levels. In one sense, Jesus is doing what is fully and completely natural to humanity. Jesus is walking. Throughout the history of the world there have been some who have tried to say that Jesus only appeared to be human. There have been some who have said that Jesus was little more than what the disciples feared he was: an apparition, a ghost. But he is not. Jesus walks. The Word of God took on human flesh so that he might do precisely what you and I do, what is natural to humankind: to walk. But at the same time that Jesus is showing that he is human like you and me, he shows that he is more than just a mere human. As my theology teacher likes to put it, he does human things, but he does them in a divine way. But he also flips that statement around, Jesus does divine things, but he does them in a human way: Jesus walks, but he walks on water. There is no doubt about it, this is not something that is natural to humankind. Jesus is God enfleshed, God “enmanned,” as one church father put it.¹ As God, Jesus is the Lord of nature. For him, nature is whatever he says that it will be, and it will do whatever he commands it to do. In this one story, in this one act, Jesus is revealing that he is God, God coming to rescue his disciples, to help them do what they simply can not do on their own, but that he has come to help them as one of them, as one of us, as a human.

But I said that there are two levels of meaning that we ought to understand what is here taking place. The first was that Jesus shows that he is God coming to rescue his disciples, and doing so as one of them. But the second level, is what the church fathers called the “spiritual sense” of the text. In this

sense, this one little story shows forth the whole history of the Church in but a few very pregnant sentences. Immediately preceding this story was the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand on but five loaves and two fish. When the people were satisfied, Jesus sends his disciples on ahead in the boat, and he goes up to the mountain to pray. So too at the end of this Gospel, in Matthew 28, Jesus sends his disciples out. He does not send them across the sea, but sends them out into the world. And like the sea that is tossed back and forth by a storm, with contrary wind, our world is tossed back and forth by the ravages of sin and death and evil, with the Zeitgeist, the spirits of each age working contrary to Christ’s purposes of love and holiness in this world. And the far shore that Christ has sent us to is not just Capernaum, but the land of eternal Light, where the Light is the Son of God. The boat that Jesus gives for reaching that far shore is like Noah’s ark, one fit to traverse any flood and storm, it is the Church. Jesus sends them off into this world in the Church, knowing that there will be trials and temptations all around, and then Jesus ascends the true mountain of God, and sits down at the Father’s right hand. And just as in this story we are told that Jesus was praying on the mountain, we are told that at the Father’s right hand Jesus ever lives to intercede for us.

Surely by all appearances, both in this story and when Jesus ascends into heaven, it looks as if Jesus has all but abandoned his beloved disciples, as if Jesus has sent his church off into this world alone as sheep amongst wolves, or we might simply say as a small boat in a big sea with contrary wind, being tossed back and forth by the waves. The Church is buffeted by temptations, each of her children is promised sufferings and trials of various kinds, both on account of the sin within us and the world and devil around us. The disciples struggle to reach that far shore, they struggle to be obedient to Christ’s command to go to the other side, much as the Church struggles to enter into the joy of her master, much as the Church struggles to be obedient to Christ’s call to be holy as he is holy. There is no doubt about it, if we merely look with our fleshly eyes, it looks as if the Lord is nowhere to be found. He sent us away with no boat for him to follow after us, and the last we heard he was ascending to go pray.

But the Word of God took on human flesh so that he might walk the waves of temptation and sorrow and suffering that assail this world, that assail us. He endured trials and temptations, he even endured death, for our sakes, so that he might do away with sin and death. He endured them so that he might “prepare the sea for us,” so that we might walk with him in this world.

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2 Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 11.6* (ANF).
For Jesus yet walks the waves of this world, Jesus yet strides over the temptations of sin, the trials and sufferings of the world, death and the devil, and we find, against all expectation, that he is ever with us. For this is precisely what Jesus promised at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: I will be with you, even to the end of the age. Jesus ascends into heaven, but he promises to ever be with us. How can both of these be true? He pours out his Spirit so that he will ever be with us. But this is no mere spiritual presence, as some have said. Jesus is with us by his Spirit, but he is with us bodily by means of his Spirit. These are two very different things. Jesus does not send us his Spirit as a replacement for himself, he sends us his Spirit so that he will be physically and bodily present with us wherever we are. Jesus sends us his Spirit so that through his Word and holy Sacraments we might encounter his flesh and blood, his own bodily reality.

But it must be said, that this bodily presence of Jesus is no longer something that we can simply view with our eyes. But, perhaps that was never actually the case. For these were the same disciples who had walked with Jesus for a long time, these were the same ones who had already been in a boat with him when he said to the waves, “peace be still.” (That was in Matthew chapter 8, six chapters before this story.) They knew what Jesus looked like. But when the disciples saw Jesus walking to them in the midst of the storm, walking to them on the waves, they thought he was a ghost, an apparition. Up until this point in the story, there is actually no indication that they were afraid or frightened. Several of the disciples were fishermen; you might assume that they knew how to handle a boat. What frightens them does not seem to be the storm; not the waves or the contrary wind. What frightens them is who they think Jesus is. What frightens them is that they think they know what they see. Their eyes have deceived them, and they are terrified. They do not know this, but what frightens them is the bodily presence of their salvation. With their eyes, with their fleshly eyes, they thought they saw a ghost, and were terrified.

But, what is it that calms their fears? What can banish their terror? Just as miraculous as when Jesus had calmed the storm with the words “peace, be still,” Jesus here calms their hearts, banishes their fears, with his word: “Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid” (v. 27). It is the Word of Jesus that not only calms their fears, but brings them to see who he is; to see that it is Jesus. It is the Word of Jesus that shows that Christ Jesus is with them. His Word brings comfort, his Word shows that he is not a ghost, not there to terrify or destroy them. He is with them to save them, he is with them to give life.

And the life that he gives, the way that he saves, is twofold. The first is shown by what Peter does, and the second is by what happens to the boat.
Peter is emboldened by the words of Jesus, “It is I; be not afraid.” “If it is really you,” Peter responds, “If it is truly you, then bid me come to you on the waters.” It is important to notice that Peter is not asking Jesus to have him walk on the water, Peter is not asking for a miraculous sign. Peter does not want to walk on water, he wants to be with Jesus. Peter is asking Jesus to bid him to come to himself. Wherever Jesus is, that is where Peter wants to be. The disciples are in the midst of a storm, but Peter knows that the right place to be is wherever Jesus is. Peter has to walk on the water simply because that is all that exists between Peter and Jesus, all that separates the two. And in this we see that there is nothing that can prevent Jesus from calling us to himself. No trials or temptations, the world, the flesh and the devil cannot keep Jesus from the one that he loves. Nothing in death or life, nothing in the realm of spirits or powers, neither angels nor demons, no storm or wave can separate us from the love that God has for us in Christ Jesus, can stop Jesus from coming to us and bringing us to himself.

But as Peter asks to be with Jesus, something astounding takes place. Jesus is God in human flesh, God become man. He walks, but he walks on water as if on dry ground. Peter has no spark of the divine in him, he is human all the way through. But when Jesus calls Peter to come to him, Peter begins to do what only Jesus can do. What Peter could not do because he is human, Jesus can and does call him to do because Jesus is Lord of nature, Jesus is the one through whom God spoke creation into existence. What was previously impossible for Peter becomes actual. What was natural for Jesus becomes a gift to Peter. Suddenly, “[Peter] could do what the Lord did, not on his own,” not in himself, “but in the Lord.”

And here again we are confronted with what I earlier called the spiritual sense of the text. Jesus walked through the trials and temptations that fallen humanity is susceptible to, so that he might walk across them victoriously, without sinning, without failure, in full love and faithfulness to his Father and in perfect love for Peter and for you and for me. And he endured these things so that his victory might be ours, so that his way of walking might become our way, so that the tempestuous sea of this world might be like walking on dry ground. Jesus saves us by coming to us in our pilgrimage through this world on the way to God our Father, and he calls us to then come to him and share in his victory over sin and death and hell, to share in his triumph over trials and temptations. In short, he calls us to walk with him over the waves and the billows.

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3 Saint Augustine
But this doesn’t suddenly become triumphalism, as if we are baptized and then sin no more. As our reading from Transfiguration Sunday had it, we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. We are growing in faith and in love, we are growing in courage, we are learning to not be afraid and to be of good cheer, as Jesus said when they thought he was a ghost. So it is no surprise that Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus and looks to the waves, and begins to sink. But in this he shows what we too must do when faced with trials and temptations, when we feel as if we are overwhelmed. He cries out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” And because Jesus is always at hand to save, Peter finds that Jesus is suddenly right beside him, and Jesus reaches down through the storm, through the waves and the contrary wind, he takes hold of Peter and lifts him up once again. Jesus shares his life and victory over sin, death and the devil with us, but even should we falter and begin to sink, he ever at hand to restore us.

The second way that Jesus shows us his salvation is when Jesus climbs into the boat. When Jesus climbs into the boat, the wind ceases altogether, the storm is exhausted, spent. When Jesus is in the boat, the winds can no longer be contrary. Now, I think that there are different ways to understand what Jesus is showing here, but I think this gives a little foretaste of what the second coming will be like. When Jesus comes again, all contrary winds, everything that is contrary to Christ and his Church will cease altogether. When Jesus comes to his own, trials and temptations will be stilled, and there will be nothing left but visible and tangible peace. And we will all together do what his disciples did there and then, with one voice, full of cheer and without any fear, we will bend the knee before Jesus and worship him, saying, “truly Thou art the Son of God.”

And as we make our journey to that far shore, as we make our way through the sea, as we make our way through Lent, we are given this Table as a foretaste of that final coming of Jesus, that final day when he brings the Church to her final destination. And as we come up to this table now, you might not see with your eyes, but know that the Lord is coming to you, in the midst of your own temptations and trials, in the midst of the buffeting waves and in the face of the contrary winds and movements of this world. And here he shows that he is no mere phantom, he is God in the flesh, and this flesh he shares with you. And here he calls you to walk with him, to receive his victory over sin, death and the devil. And when he tells you to come, even should you stumble, even should you begin to sink underneath trials and temptations, he reaches his hand down into the storm and holds you up. And so let us now come to Jesus Christ who “sits enthroned above the flood,” as Psalm 29 has it. For as those first disciples said, and as every disciple after them has said, he
truly is the Son of God, to whom belongs all glory and honor, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.