

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, February 21, 2024
Matthew 14:22-36
That to Which We Attend

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 14:22-36, RSV
Last week we read Jesus feeding the five thousand. Now he walks on the water and heals the sick at Gennes'aret.

²²Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them. ²⁵And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out for fear. ²⁷But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."

²⁸And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; ³⁰but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

³⁴And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennes'aret. ³⁵And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent round to all that region and brought to him all that were sick, ³⁶and besought him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well.

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

In this evening's reading, we see a picture of faith arising and faith fading away. I mean Peter. One moment he is a man of extraordinary faith, even to the degree that he walks on the water. The next moment he is sinking. The difference concerns that to which we attend.

What a night those disciples had endured! It was not until the fourth watch of the night that Jesus came to them. He had spent the night on a mountain, alone in prayer. The fourth watch means that the night is far advanced and dawn is drawing near. The sea had been contrary. The disciples' boat was being beaten by the waves. Then Jesus appears, walking

on the water. Peter is the impetuous one. He is always ready to spring forward. Glad to say, he does not simply jump out of the boat in his haste to draw near to Jesus. Instead, he asks Jesus to bid him to come. Jesus does bid him and Peter then gets out of the boat and walks on the water to Jesus. That is a wonderful thing, that a mere human being should be able to walk on the sea. But Peter had the great advantage that the Master of the Sea had bid him come, and relying on the Master's Word, Peter came, walking on the water. And so it is that we see faith arising on earth in a remarkable way. Peter, trusting the word of Jesus, walks on the sea.

But then we come to the collapse of the faith that had sustained Peter on those waves. Peter became mindful of other considerations. He lost his focus on Jesus and began to consider other things. Our text puts it this way:

So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; ³⁰but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me."

When Peter shifted his focus from Jesus to the wind and the waves, then his faith faded away. He sank, but glad to say, he had made it close enough to Jesus that Jesus could reach out and save him.

Thus we see the rising up of faith and its fading away. It is a matter of that to which we attend. The good path is to focus on Jesus even more than we focus on the wind and the waves. This is an important point for the Christian life. Attending to the wind and the waves is a legitimate thing. Peter was a fisherman. He knew the power of the wind and the waves. He knew their danger. There is nothing wrong with paying attention to the wind and the waves... there is nothing wrong with that, I say, *unless* our attention to them breaks our attention to Jesus.

You and I live in a busy world with lots of things tugging on our attention. Among those tugging things are legitimate things — things we *should* certainly attend to, like the responsibilities of our job, our health, our friendships, our family. And then, there are other things that also cry out for our attention, including t.v. and our smart phones. Americans use our smart phones so often it is almost like voluntary epilepsy. When we are in church, it is easier to think of Jesus. But once we return to the work-away world, we tend to become mindful of the wind and the waves and to leave Jesus behind.

The problem is not that we live in a busy world with many things tugging on our attention. The problem is forgetting Jesus — losing sight of him amidst the chaos of everyday life.

There are disciplines that can help us along these lines. Lent is a good time to work at developing those disciplines.

Starting off the day with prayer and a passage of scripture helps frame the day in such a way that we remain mindful of Jesus that day.

In my opinion, a key discipline is to develop the instinct to ask ourselves the question, "What would Jesus do?" I bet we can go for long stretches of the day with no need to ask that question. We are immersed in matters that we judge are not troubling to Jesus. But there are other times when the wind and the waves of life would lead us to forget about Jesus and to do something unworthy of him. If so, our faith is in danger of fading away.

It might be that you and I have to work harder at this than did our grandparents. Back then, here in America, lots of people thought about Jesus. And society was shaped in such a way as to encourage us to do only the things that we thought would please Jesus. But nowadays, not so much. Nowadays, just about anything goes. In such a world, we need to work harder at being mindful of Jesus.

This evening's passage concludes with miracles of healing. Notice that even the fringe of Jesus's garment was enough. And so we read:

³⁴And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennes'aret. ³⁵And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent round to all that region and brought to him all that were sick, ³⁶and besought him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well. (Matthew 14:34-36, RSV)

And so it is that we find that Jesus is not only Master of the storms on the sea, but also Master of the storms in the human body. It is worthwhile, then, to attend to Jesus. None of those other winds and waves can do for us and for our loved ones what Jesus can do. The One to whom we should attend is Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.