

*Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 7.viii.2005, 9:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Chanceford Township, York Co., Pennsylvania
I Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 85; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33
Holy Communion, WOV summer abbreviated Setting 5*

J. J. !*

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! Amen.

“Peter answered Him: ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ He said: ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him, saying to Him: ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’”

-- Matthew 14:28-31

I was looking forward to preparing the sermon for this Sunday until I actually sat down with the texts for today, especially the First Reading, from I Kings 19, and today’s Gospel from Matthew 14. These are intimidating texts, to me at least. Perhaps *you* have the faith to withstand the persecution of an entire kingdom bent on killing you, as Elijah did, the faith to go on like a hunted animal and to overcome your fear, the faith to go on even though you want to simply give up and die, even though you pray for death, as Elijah did, but I do not. Perhaps, like Peter, you have the faith to get out of

a boat in a raging storm on a great inland sea and walk to shore across the water, faith that Our Lord called, 'little faith,' but I do not have even such 'little faith.' And yet, I do have faith enough by God's grace to me in Baptism to want to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to me through God's Word in Scripture today, so, bear with me as I listen. If you, too, are of 'little faith,' then I invite you to listen with me.

Today's First Reading and Holy Gospel have two things in common, if you will notice: a voice and a mighty wind. The voice is the voice and call of God. The wind is the wind of all our terrors and fears, the wind that cannot touch us where faith in God's call to us is our focus. The setting of the First Reading is the Prophet Elijah's role in the epic struggle between faith in God the Creator and LORD of Israel and the Canaanite worship of the creation itself and the powers of fertility and reproduction. Elijah is hated, despised and hunted by almost everyone. His situation and his state of mind reminds me of the Reformer, Martin Luther, during his period of protective custody in the Wartburg castle, a stone hiding place like Elijah's cave. The winds of persecution, self doubt and near despair rage all around,

but it is the still, small voice of God's call that saves both men of God, the Prophet and the Reformer. The Holy Spirit whispers to Elijah in his cave of refuge. Luther remembers the name of the Holy Trinity and the words of the Church administering the waters of his own Baptism, as a tiny newborn, words spoken quietly over him in Church Latin at nearly the beginning of his life, words of which he was reminded by parents and sponsors and by the teaching of the Church.

The miracle of Jesus' walking on the water and saving of the disciples in their boat through the quieting of the storm recounted in today's Gospel is one of the very few that is witnessed in two of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew 14 and Mark 6, *and in John*, Chapter 6, but, oddly, not at all in Luke. However, the other miracle, Jesus' rescue of Peter, is found only in Matthew. Why that is, I doubt we shall ever know, but one possible explanation is this. The Early Christian community which named itself and its Gospel for Saint Matthew the Apostle, is believed to have consisted of second or third generation Christians, that is, of Christians for whom faith in Jesus and Messiah was in some sense 'normal' within their own

community, even though it met with consternation, opposition and some forms of persecution from outside that community. These were people who, like us, are *used* to faith in Christ as a normal part of life. Perhaps they clung to this story of Peter's doubting so tenaciously that they wrote it down because it shows that doubt and fear remain a part of our experience in this life, and that God reaches out to us in that fear in Jesus. If *Peter* can doubt and cry out in fear and begin to sink and to be swallowed up by his doubt and fear, Peter who, of all Christians, had the courage, *more than any of the others* in the boat, *more than any of the rest of us*, to get out of the boat and begin to walk across the water to Jesus, why, then, should *we* not expect such trials of faith?


Why indeed? Note that it is not the obvious threat of the depth and breadth and roughness of the black waters of the sea at night that is the cause of Peter's terror. It is what he did not notice at first, *the wind*, that diverts his focus from the One Who calls him from the distant shore. We never see at first in life what we fail to notice, but there it is to strike us in the face a little later on. Peter had spent so much time on the Sea of Galilee, perhaps it seemed to him like an


old friend, but the winds of the storm were another matter, something he had not counted on, a power strong enough to fill the sail of his boat and drive it forward or to hold it back in a storm against all the strength of the crew at their oars, strong enough to blow the Big Fisherman away like so much sea foam.

Peter, sinking up to his chest in the storm, is not unlike many in our own nation, just a short time ago so ready to go to war to avenge our innocent dead and to warn our enemies not to repeat their outrages, but now surprised that that war has cost the lives of so many civilians and soldiers, nearly 2,000 lives of our own young men and women in the service of this nation, not realizing, apparently, that is but the prelude to the Western Civilization's struggle with a new kind of fascism, one much more fanatical and even more ruthless than any of the fascisms of the last century. The shore of peace seems increasingly distant. If our focus and resolve is based on nothing higher than our yearning for a return to a 'normal' life of prosperity and convenience, we shall never reach it.

In our personal life of faith, we may feel prepared to bear what feels to us to be a 'normal' amount of suffering, of

disappointment, of pain or of offense from others, but what happens when our experience of any of the above goes beyond the pale of what we had expected? What happens when our faith in *God's* faithfulness is tested by unexpected and indescribable loss, massive tragedy on the world stage, *tsunami* here and famine there, or massive suffering, loss and tragedy in our own lives and those of others close to us, loss that goes beyond words? What happens to our footing then in our walk toward Christ in this life to the far shore of the life to come?

I do not have the faith of Peter, but I do believe that I will find the faith *I* need, and that you will find the faith *you* need as we keep our eyes and ears open to the One Who calls us to Himself. Where He and the Cross of His own innocent suffering and death are our point of reference, we shall neither lose our way nor perish along it, no matter how far the shore of our destination may seem, for He does not simply wait there, testing us, but He comes out into the storm to reach us and to save us. This is most certainly true!  Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever.  Amen.

S. D. G.!** _____

**Jesu juva!* = 'O Jesus, help!' abbrev. '*J.J.!*'

***Soli Deo Gloria!* = 'To God alone be the glory!' abbrev. '*S.D.G.!*'