

Sermon - Trinity 10

“Faith in the Presence of God” (Matthew 14:22–33; Psalm 85:8–13)

O Lord, take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire with love for yourself. Amen.

Matthew tells the story of Jesus walking on water with remarkable precision. Every detail in his account serves a theological purpose because what Matthew describes is not simply a retelling of a miracle on a lake, but it is a revelation of who Jesus is, and what it means to trust him.

The narrative begins with an unusual verb. Jesus *made* the disciples get into the boat. The original Greek word is stronger, with the sense of Jesus compelling the disciples, insisting that they go ahead without him. So, the crossing of the lake was not the disciples' idea. They were on this journey because Jesus directed them there.

This observation challenges a common assumption that obedience guarantees an easier life. But our gospel passage presents the opposite interpretation. The disciples encounter trouble because they are following Christ. Faithfulness does not exempt us from suffering (Matthew 10:16-25). The boat is battered by the waves because "the wind was against them." The gospel writer uses language that suggests opposition and resistance. The disciples' journey has become a struggle.

Matthew also notes the time. Our version of the text, the New Revised Standard Version, says, “early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake.” But the Greek original states that Jesus came during “the

fourth watch of the night,” namely the hours between three and six in the morning.

This interlude of time is often described as the darkest period before dawn. Throughout Scripture, this is often the moment when God acts. At the Red Sea, God acted during the night watch to deliver Israel, according to the text of Exodus 14:24-27. Matthew intentionally evokes the Exodus narrative, presenting Jesus as the one through whom God once again brings deliverance. The darkest hour becomes the moment of divine deliverance. Perhaps you can relate to that experience. I can.

And while the disciples were battling the wind and waves on Lake Galilee, Jesus remained alone on the mountain to pray. This too is significant. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, mountains are places of revelation. Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Later he was transfigured on a mountain. Finally, after the resurrection, he commissioned his disciples from a mountain in Galilee.

In today's gospel narrative, while the disciples struggle below, Jesus stands between heaven and earth, praying and interceding, just as the writer to the Hebrews states in his letter (Hebrews 7:25). Matthew is reminding readers that even when Christ seems absent, he is not inactive. His apparent absence is not abandonment.

Then comes the astonishing appearance of Jesus walking upon the sea. To modern readers this may sound like another miracle, but for the original audience, especially Jewish readers, it carried a much deeper meaning. In the Old Testament, the sea represents more than water. It's the symbol of

chaos, disorder, death and powers hostile to God's purposes. Yet God sovereignly rules the sea.

Job declared that God "alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8). The Psalms celebrate the Lord who stills the roaring waters (Ps. 29:3; 89:9; 107:25-29).

In recounting Jesus' walking upon the sea, Matthew is making a profound theological claim. Jesus is doing what Israel's Scriptures say only God can do. And no wonder the disciples were terrified. They thought that they were seeing a ghost. Fear had distorted their perception. That is a characteristic of fear, which often prevents us from seeing reality clearly.

Then Jesus speaks, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

"It is I". The English translation is grammatically correct but it diminishes something important. The Greek says, **ἐγώ εἰμι**, which is simply "I ... am..." Matthew uses language that echoes God's self-revelation to Moses at the burning bush: "I AM WHO I AM."

Standing upon the waters of chaos, Jesus speaks with words affirming divine presence, of God's own identity. The miracle is not about walking on water. It is about recognising **who** is walking on the water.

Peter responds. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you." His request has sometimes been criticised as impulsive or reckless. But notice what he asks. He does not ask for power to perform a miracle. He asks to obey a command.

Faith, in Matthew's Gospel, is always responsive. Jesus speaks. The disciple obeys. Everything depends upon the word of Christ. And Jesus answers with a single word, "Come". That one word creates the possibility for Peter to do what would otherwise be impossible. It reminds us that God's commands are never mere demands. They are invitations empowered by the One who speaks them.

And Peter does walk on water. That fact is often overlooked. But the gospel passage says clearly that Peter came toward Jesus on the water.

His first steps are not a failure of faith but an expression of it. Then Peter "noticed the strong wind." The wind had always been present. Nothing external had changed. Only Peter's attention changed.

Faith does not deny reality. The wind, the waves, the storm remain real and dangerous. But faith gives greater weight to Christ than to the storm. Fear only becomes dominant when circumstances occupy more of our vision than Christ himself.

And Peter, he begins to sink. His prayer is wonderfully brief, one of the shortest in Scripture. "Lord, save me." There is no elaborate theology. No carefully crafted liturgy. Just desperate dependence. And we are told that Jesus *immediately* reached out his hand.

Immediately. I love it that grace precedes explanation. Jesus rescues Peter, and only afterwards does he ask, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Jesus does not call Peter faithless. Little faith is still faith. The problem is not that Peter has no faith, but that his faith is divided between his circumstances and Christ.

When Jesus enters the boat, the wind ceases, and the disciples respond: "Truly you are the Son of God." This is the first time the disciples as a group give Jesus this title, confessing his divine sonship. The confession comes directly out of their experience of his lordship over chaos.

And today's passage from Psalm 85 deepens what the gospel passage has shown us. The Psalmist declares, "I will listen to what the Lord God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people."

The peace of Psalm 85 is not the absence of storms. It's the peace that comes because God has drawn near. The Psalm celebrates the meeting of heaven and earth: "Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

These beautiful words find their fullest expression in Christ himself. In Jesus, God's steadfast love and God's faithfulness meet. In Jesus, divine righteousness and divine peace embrace. In Jesus, heaven comes walking across the waters toward a frightened humanity.

The Psalm ends with a promise: "Righteousness shall go before him and direct his steps in the way." We are shown those steps for they are the steps of the Son of God walking on the stormy waves.

The Church has often viewed the boat in this passage as an image of the Christian community, tossed about by opposition and uncertainty. That image remains true today. The Church still encounters contrary winds. As individual Christians, we may still experience nights when Christ seems absent. But our scripture insists that appearances are not the whole truth.

The Lord is praying. He is coming. He is speaking. And he is reaching out his hand.

And the Lord who treads across the waters of chaos is none other than the great "I AM," the God who has come among us in Jesus Christ. That is why the final response is not simply relief but worship. The goal of the story is not that we admire a miracle. The goal is that we adore the One to whom the miracle points.

The deep question facing us is not whether storms will come. They do. They will. The question is whether, in the midst of them, we recognise the One who says, "Take courage. I ... am... Do not be afraid." Amen.