

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Hand of God”

Rev. David K. Groth

August 20, 2023

Read Matthew 14:22-33

I was glad and grateful and relieved Pastor O’Donnell was able to cover for me last weekend. I *hate* bowing out last minute because of illness; it puts the volunteer replacement in a pinch. But Pastor O’Donnell didn’t even flinch, and delivered a wonderful sermon that I was able to watch online. I was also grateful he focused mostly on last week’s epistle lesson, which means the sermon I prepared for last week could be teed up this week. Also a blessing. It’s from Matthew 14, the second in a series of three quick miracles. Jesus walks on water and invites Peter to do the same.

For those of us who have been Christians for as long as we can remember, sometimes we underestimate the impact faith has on us. When we are baptized and believe in Jesus, we know we have been ushered into the most secure position in the universe. It does not mean things will be easy, but it does mean He will always be with us, and we are safe in Him. Unbelievers forfeit that assurance and peace.

To give perspective I share with you the words of an indigenous man from South America. Translated, his comments read: “It used to be, when I was living in the jungle without Jesus, we never knew a day without fear. When we woke up in the morning, we were afraid. When we went out of our houses, we were afraid. When we walked along the river, we were afraid. We saw an evil spirit in every stone and tree and waterfall. We saw evil spirits inside of us. When night fell, fear came into our huts and stayed with us all night long.” He continued, “But when Jesus came, the fear was gone. When Jesus came, we had hope and we could rest because we knew He had changed our world. We still were surrounded by the jungle, but we had Jesus” (Quoted from LHM Daily Devotions, 10/6/2012). Beautifully said.

You and I live in a different kind of jungle, but one that can also fill us with fears. Fear of global warming, of random violence, of nuclear war, bioterrorism, fear of personal failure, fear of outliving our savings, fear of Alzheimer’s, of death. Sometimes our fears can be irrational, like the dread fear of a daddy-long-legs in the corner of the bedroom. Sometimes our fears get the better of us.

One time, the disciples of Jesus saw what they assumed was a ghost, and the spectacle got the better of them. They were scared half to death.

Jesus has just fed the crowd of thousands with five little loaves of bread and two fish. John reports that same crowd is so affected by the miracle that they are thinking about making Jesus their bread king. So, what to do? Jesus tells his disciples to get back into their boat and head to the other side of the lake. He’ll meet them there. Then Jesus firmly dismisses the crowd, tells them it’s time to go home, and hikes up on a mountain by Himself to pray.

Time passes. By now the disciples are out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, but it’s slow going. They are pulling against the wind. Two steps forward, one step back. It’s hard, but they’re dealing with it. They’re handling it and God lets them. He does that with us too. Most of the time, God lets us deal with the stress in our lives using the resources He has given us – prayer, good friends, good nutrition and sleep, Lord’s Supper, and so forth. So, the wind is not the big problem here. The disciples are not asking for help weathering the storm.

The big problem comes to them at 3 or 4 in the morning when they see something they cannot explain. Matthew says it with the flattest of affects. “And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea.” These seasoned fishermen, they’re not afraid of strong head winds, but they’re terrified by the spectacle of a man walking toward them on the water. It would be one thing if just one of them saw it. That could say, “He always had a few screws loose.” But they all see it, and this cannot be easily dismissed. They are feeling terror and confusion.

You and I would react the same way. Our rational brains would soon give way to old superstitions, and we would also conclude it was some kind of ghost, maybe someone who drowned years ago and is still haunting those waters. Whatever it is, they know it cannot be good and they cry out in fear. Immediately Jesus speaks to them and encourages them. Note the word “immediately”. He does not let them marinate in their terror just for good measure. “Immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’” Note also He’s not angry with them for being afraid.

We can always count on Peter to say or do something interesting. Sure enough, he does not disappoint. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to You on the water.” Notice, Peter isn’t all together convinced it is Jesus. He wants it to be Jesus, but he is not completely sure.

How many times have we spoken to Jesus like that? How often have we wavered in our faith?

- If You really are out there, Jesus, then prove it. Give me a sign.
- If you really love me, Jesus, then fix my marriage.
- If you really listen to prayers, Jesus, then help me find a better job.
- If you really care, Jesus, then don't stand back and watch him die of cancer.

Remember when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness? Satan used similar words. "If you are the Son of God, then command these stones to become bread" (Mt. 4:3). "If you are the Son of God, then throw Yourself down and let the angels bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone" (v. 6). When Satan spoke like that to Jesus, Jesus resisted him, repelled him, said to him, "Be gone, Satan!" Yet when Jesus hears these words from the mouth of Peter, He does not repel him. He invites him. Why? Because Jesus came to defeat Satan. He did not come to defeat His people. He came to teach them and save them.

Jesus has a one-word reply for Peter: "Come." Given his impulsivity, it is no surprise Peter accepts the invitation and steps out of the boat. If Jesus can walk on water, maybe He can lend this miraculous ability to someone else. So, Peter climbs over the side of the boat and takes the leap (or step) of faith, and by gum he walks on water. He walks to Jesus. But then, seeing the wind, he is afraid, and begins to sink. He's wavering. He's of two minds. It's like the cry of that father, "I believe. Help thou my unbelief." Or as James writes, "The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind" (1:6). As he sinks he cries out, "Lord, save!"

"Immediately Jesus reached out His hand and took hold of him." Again, notice the word "immediately". He doesn't let Peter sink deeper into the depths just to make a point. He reaches out with a strong arm and grasps the hand of His fearful disciple. Peter's fear and doubt do not nullify the Lord's love for him. 2 Timothy 2, "If we are faithless, he remains faithful." The Lord does not want you to be full of fears and doubts, but even when you are, He still loves you and is still with you and ready to save.

Jesus is still strong to save. Don't put your trust anywhere else. "Do not put your trust in princes (politicians, doctors, scientists) because in them there is no salvation" (Ps. 146:3). Do not put your trust in the green revolution to save the planet, or in technology and science. They cannot save any of us from sin and death. Put your faith in Jesus because Jesus saves. Even when our faith wavers and is of two minds, even when our doubts toss us about like wind driven waves . . . Jesus saves. For some faith can swing radically between the extremes of full-throttle belief on one day and genuine unbelief the next. Yet His faithfulness to us is like a river that just keeps flowing.

How many movies have you seen where the good guy is holding the villain by one hand over the side of a very tall building. And the good guy is thinking, "You know life would be better for me (and probably a lot of other people too) if I just let go of this scoundrel." Jesus has a hold on you, but never has that debate. He didn't die for you on a cross only to let go of you now. He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, He's not going to give up on you. He will hold on to you all the way to the trumpet call on the Last Day. On that day He will bring His people safely to Himself forever, and the unbelievers will go their own way.

Maybe you've launched your children. They have jobs and homes and perhaps their own families. But somewhere along the way, they seem to have forgotten Jesus and it breaks your heart. I'm here to tell you Jesus has not forgotten them! Maybe your children don't ever remember the Lord or their baptisms or take comfort in them. But Jesus remembers the baptismal promises He made to them. Maybe they hardly ever think about God. But Jesus cannot stop thinking about them. Maybe they're smart and well-educated but also succumb to irrational fears and beliefs. The love of Jesus for them is also irrational. He will do at least as much as He has promised. He will even walk on water for you. And no water is so deep that He cannot reach you with His strong hand. No sin is so great that His blood cannot wash it away. No heart is so hard that He cannot soften it and speak faith into it.

Jesus loves us so much that our fears and doubts never deter Him. He is patient with us. He proves His love and patience not just when He reaches out and saves us from the depths, but mostly when He stretched out His arms on a cross to forgive and redeem us.

I think Peter learned something about himself that day, his doubts, his fears, his faith. More importantly, I think he learned something about the love of God in Christ Jesus who is strong to save despite our doubts and fears. Thanks be to God. Amen.