



Sunday August 13, 2023
Matthew 14:22-33 (Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

This past week our family was up north on vacation at my wife's family cottage in Eagle River. It's an incredibly special place that we deeply love for its peacefulness and all the fun and laughter that takes place when we're there.

And I don't know exactly what it is, but there's just something special about being there that feels different. The air seems fresher, the sky appears clearer, and the stars just seem to shine brighter. That, and all of us tend to feel far more relaxed when we're there.

Plus, there are so many wonderful things for us to do – yard games during the day, card and board games at night, campfires and smores, fishing, swimming, kayaking, paddleboarding, relaxing pontoon rides at sunset, and trips into town for shopping, ice cream, and cell phone signal. But hands down, my absolute favorite thing to do when we're there is to ride our jet ski.

And I'm not talking about leisurely tooling around the lake either...that's what the pontoon boat or kayaks are for. No, what I'm talking about is fast, wild, and thrilling rides – creating big waves to jump over and big swells to dive into.

However, what you probably don't know about me is that I've always had a love-hate relationship with large bodies of water like lakes and oceans. I'm not exactly sure why, but as much as I love being in and on the water I'm actually pretty fearful of them.

Even admitting this feels a bit strange since over the years I've trained and raced in them for triathlons, played in them with our kids, gone snorkeling, scuba diving, skiing, and knee boarding – but all the while keeping my anxiety in check in order to experience the thrill and fun the water offers.

I've often wondered if it's due to my desire for control, along with the fact that most times I can't see what's potentially lurking, I mean *swimming* below me or how far down the bottom is. Then again, maybe it's just self-inflicted anxiety caused from too many years of watching *Shark Week* on TV.

Nevertheless, the other day I was out jet skiing, and although the weather wasn't great – it was overcast, cool, and rather windy – and it actually created some pretty good waves on the water, so I wasn't about to miss out on this opportunity for fun.

But while I was out the wind started to pick up even more and the waves were getting bigger, and for just a moment I got lost in my thoughts and briefly stopped focusing on maneuvering the waves, when I suddenly jumped a series of large waves and then dove into a deep swell causing the jet ski to dip under water and roll over dragging me under. A moment later the jet ski came to the surface and flipped back over, and I immediately followed, popping up safely next to it thanks to my lifejacket.

For a brief moment though, fear got the best of me as the jet ski went under and rolled upside down with me still on it. Thankfully, my lifejacket, that I never go without but don't often give much thought to, did exactly as I'd hoped and brought me quickly to the surface.

So, after reading today's Gospel I wonder if Peter had a similar experience when he began to sink after taking his eyes off Jesus and needed Jesus to reach out to catch and save him from the raging sea.

In today's Gospel lesson, after Jesus sends the disciples across the sea, a storm arises that threatens to overwhelm them. They spend the better part of an anxious night navigating the waves, and in the early hours of the morning Jesus walks across the water to meet them.

Mistaking Jesus for a wave-walking ghost, the disciples grow even more alarmed as he draws near. In response, Jesus reassures them by telling them that *it is he* who is coming to them and that they need not be afraid.

However, the issue isn't fear; the issue is where the fear leads. Notice where Peter's fear leads him. He has every right to be afraid – feeling scared in the face of danger isn't the problem. The problem is that his fear leads him straight to suspicion and distrust. His fear leads him to test and question Jesus's identity, instead of taking Jesus's self-disclosure at face value. It's as if Peter is saying, "*If it's you, then enable me to do the*



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impossible. If it's you, then make a miracle happen so my doubt will be cast aside. If it's you, Jesus, if you really are who you say, then reorder reality and prove to me that you are God."

Peter's actions in this story cut right through me. I recognize them well. Like Peter, I too fail to recognize Jesus when life gets rough. When I face frightening circumstances, I'm embarrassed to say that my go-to isn't trust; it's suspicion.

And in my fear, I forget that my relationship with God is complex, and I reduce it to something grossly transactional, *"Okay, Jesus, prove that you care about me. I'll do A, but then you better do B in return."* Sound familiar? *"If you do this thing for me Jesus, then I will..."*. Go ahead, personalize it to your own circumstances.

Deep down I know that I should keep focused and trust it all to Jesus, but if I'm being honest...it's just not that easy. Because no matter how hard I try, I seem to get distracted, worried, and even overwhelmed at times by the waves and the storms that surround me.

And this is why I think most people hear this Gospel and walk away believing that the message is clear – Peter's troubles result from him taking his eyes off Jesus and if he would just stay focused on Jesus then everything would be okay.

But doing so, for me at least, confuses the Gospel with good advice. Don't get me wrong, it's not that good advice isn't meaningful – we *should* keep our eyes on Jesus. It's just that the funny thing about advice is that it can never create what it demands.

I'm pretty sure all of us know the wealth of advice the world is all too ready to inflict on us. You know, the kind that emphasizes Peter's failure in today's Gospel... You should do this. You should do that. If only you did this better. If only you were smarter, prettier, more likable, wealthier, more generous, kinder. If only you sided with my political beliefs – if only you were more faithful.

This is why I want to invite us to consider a different possibility – yet something so simple we often miss it. I want us to consider looking to Jesus. And no, I'm not kidding or being sarcastic. If we actually look at what Jesus does when Peter takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to sink then I think it will all be clear to us. It's right there in verse 31, *"Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him."*

There it is – the very heart of the story. Yes, Peter should have kept his eyes on Jesus...and so should we. But the power of this Gospel story doesn't lie in Peter's faith, doubt, courage, or fear – nor in ours. When we don't keep our eyes on Jesus, when we falter, or even fail, Jesus will be there to catch us. This Gospel story is meant to reveal who Jesus is, and that's clearly revealed by the disciples when they worship and announce, *"Truly you are the Son of God."*

Whatever storms are swirling around you – whether it's a relationship that's falling apart, or you recently received an unwelcome diagnosis, or you're facing the uncertainty of an upcoming surgery, or your getting older, or struggling with a sick or difficult child, or an unfriendly neighbor, or financial or job insecurity, or political division, or any other storms that threaten our lives – just remember that it's our own lack of trusting Jesus that leads us deeper into fear and hopelessness.

Maybe, when Jesus asks Peter and us why *we* doubt, what he's really asking is: why do you doubt *me*? Why do you not trust that I'm being honest with you? Why do you doubt that I am with you, for you, in you, and around you? After all this time, why do you still feel a need to test me?

My friends, Jesus isn't simply our guide or life coach; he's our Savior, the One who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And unlike Peter and the disciples...and even us, Jesus' focus never changes. It is constant, relentless, determined, and committed.

It is for us that he calls out across the terrifying waves, again and again and again, *"Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."* And it is this Jesus who wants more than just to command our attention – he wants to save our lives. And he has promised and done exactly that. Thanks be to God! Amen.