



## Things You Never Expect to Hear

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
13 August 2017

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I will often tell people that I have a difficult time taking all 6 Sundays off during the year that are allotted to pastors here at Ascension. I miss the weekly check-in with many of you...the updates on health concerns...the joy of new children and grandchildren...the celebrations of vacations...the gift of community as the body of Christ. I miss it when I am not here and yet I know for my own health and for yours it is good for your pastors to be away every now and again. In late July, Ileen and I took off for Southern CA to share in the celebration of a wedding. Now you know, by her own admission, how much Pastor Angela loves to be outside and sweating. I, on the other hand, enjoy the outdoors but on my own terms – shorts and a t-shirt and flip-flops. A three-piece suit and a polyester alb is not my idea of a good time in direct sun whether or not the ocean is thirty feet away or not. But that was the plan – and the location was beautiful. And at 5pm – I had a sound check and now waited for the guests to arrive. I was waiting to put on my alb until the last minute and walking around in my suit was an easy moment of blending in with the crowd – or so I thought. Until I walked down the stairs by myself from the balcony where the wedding was taking place to the shaded second level. As I was walking down the stairs three couples in their early sixties were walking up the stairs. The second man in the line stopped me and asked, “does the hotel provide misters for the wedding guests?” “What!” Wait! Do I look like I work here? No way. And in my shock I must have been stupefied into silence...because the man looked at me again and said, “uh, misters?” “No.” I said. “However, there is a water station at the top of the stairs and you could dump a cup of water over your head.” And I headed down the stairs. Well, you know that term – Karma. As the wedding was preparing to begin - the groom and I made our way up the stairs – the balcony was packed and as we walked by the last row. A young woman in her late twenties tapped her boyfriend on the shoulder and said, “honey, honey – look, how cute – they got a priest!” Things you never expect to hear in a normal day of work.

And for the disciples this day...when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them



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and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." It was the first time—the disciples had seen this power of Jesus at their doorstep. Miracles of healing; feeding the multitudes; teaching with authority unlike any they had ever seen. All taken at Jesus' word—but this—this power of God presented this morning—to walk on water—is impossible. And yet here is Jesus doing this very thing. And had I been there—I am not sure what would have taken more of my energy—my utter disbelief—my absolute shock—or my tail between my legs kind of fear. After all this is God walking on the water. Am I so sheltered, so involved in myself—so bound by the rules of physics that I cannot comprehend such an activity for the God of creation?

And then there is Peter. 28 Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." *Talk about things you never expect to hear in a normal day.* So Peter gets out of the boat, starts walking on the water, and comes toward Jesus. 30 But when Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt? Sometimes God pushes us into that leap of faith.

On the plane ride out to CA, I decided to download a movie for the airplane. I had been wanting to watch the shack and decided - a quiet plane ride - an easy four hours...no problem. Problem! Have you seen the movie? If not, I encourage you to rent it and watch it. Much like the book, the movie spoke to me in ways that I was not expecting. If you do not know the storyline - here it is... "After suffering a family tragedy, Mack Phillips spirals into a deep depression that causes him to question his innermost beliefs. Facing a crisis of faith, he receives a mysterious letter urging him to an abandoned shack in the Oregon wilderness. Despite his doubts, Mack journeys to the shack and encounters an enigmatic trio of strangers (you would know them as the Holy Trinity) led by a woman named Papa (we would call Papa - God the Father). Through this meeting, Mack finds important truths that will transform his understanding of his tragedy and change his life forever." After that summary I am not sure I want to see the movie...but the story is so much more. And so sitting on the plane, I watched the movie - earbuds in my ears - ipad screen aglow - the movie started. And about 35 minutes into the movie - I am tearing up, and at 50 minutes, I am



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wiping the snot from my nose and my wife gives me one of those “What are you watching” looks. And at an hour and a half, I am quietly sobbing. Oh this movie. The parallels to this life we live are pretty amazing. At one point in the movie, the main character looks at God and asks, “Why I am I here?” And God looks at the main character and says, “This is where you got stuck.” No truer words have been spoken. I kid you not – I had to stop the movie twice to wipe my nose and ask my wife for a Kleenex. The flight attendant came by asking about a drink and I just waived her away too overcome to talk to her. I was a mess. But we still had two hours and I had to get to the end of the movie. Tell me in the midst of this story line there would be resurrection. I needed the resurrection moment. Otherwise it was going to be one painfully sad wedding ceremony. “This is where you got stuck?”

For the disciples this day, they were stuck on the edge of belief and disbelief. They had handed over their lives to someone they could not yet readily put their faith in completely. They were stuck on the edge between seeing with their own eyes and believing with their whole hearts. They were stuck between their fear and their faith. Stuck between doubt and determination. Stuck between death and deliverance. And then Jesus does what Jesus does best! Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter, and Kathy, and Nancy, and Marvin, and Andrew, and John, saying to them, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

There is a book that has been out for some time now written by John Ortberg titled, “If You Want to Walk on Water, You Have to Get Out of the Boat.” Ortberg writes, “Walking on water means facing your fears and choosing not to let fear have the last word. Walking on water means discovering and embracing the unique calling of God on your life. Walking on water means experiencing the power of God in your life to do something you would not be capable of doing on your own.”

And even when we do decide it is okay to step out of the boat—to stretch beyond ourselves a little—well even then God does not promise that all will go smoothly. Alice was to bake a cake for the church ladies' group bake sale, but she forgot to do it until the last minute. She baked an angel food cake and when she took it from the oven, the center had dropped flat. She said, "Oh



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dear, there's no time to bake another cake." So, she looked around the house for something to build up the center of the cake. Alice found it in the bathroom ... a roll of toilet paper. She plunked it in and covered it with icing. The finished product looked beautiful, so she rushed it to the church. Before she left the house, Alice had given her daughter some money and specific instructions to be at the bake sale the minute it opened, and to buy that cake and bring it home. When the daughter arrived at the sale, the attractive cake had already been sold. Alice was beside herself. The next day, Alice was invited to a friend's home where two tables of bridge were to be played that afternoon. After the game, a fancy lunch was served, and to top it off, the cake in question was presented for dessert. Alice saw the cake, she started to get out of her chair to rush into the kitchen to tell her hostess all about it, but before she could get to her feet, one of the other ladies said, "What a beautiful cake!" Alice sat back in her chair when she heard the hostess (who was a prominent church member) say. "Thank you, I baked it myself."

Sometimes it is better to get out of the boat—walk with Jesus on the water or wherever. The good news is that you and I do not always have to have the answers when the questions come. We do not always need to be the ones who are first to respond to a need or walk into the darkest of situations without any light to guide our feet. Jesus walks before us and comes to us and walks with us. Even when we get stuck. *Especially*, when we get stuck.

The command most often given in the Bible is not "Love one another" it is "Do not be afraid." God speaks these words to Abram in Genesis 15; to Hagar in Genesis 21; to Joseph in Genesis 46; to the people of Israel through Moses in Exodus 20; to Joshua in Joshua 11; to Elijah in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings; to Joseph in Matthew 1; to the shepherds in Luke 2; to the disciples in Matthew 14; to Mary Magdalene in Matthew 28; more than 140 times in the Bible...get the idea yet? What do we fear? Where do we get stuck? And what does God promise? 32 When Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Talk about – things you never expect to hear! And at the end of the day that is all we need remember. To trust that Jesus offers us every good gift to follow God's call in this world and



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promises to be with us each and every day in this life and in the life to come in the Kingdom of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.