

**Sermon: The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Matthew 14:22–33 | The Rev. Roger Ferlo | August 13, 2023**

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We live on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor of the 1700 building, across 57<sup>th</sup> Drive from the Museum of Science and Industry. Our east facing windows look out directly over Lake Michigan. It's a privilege living there, and we love the views. You never know what you might see from that bird's eye perch. The other day we thought we were sure we saw a hippopotamus standing still about 100 yards off-shore from the 57<sup>th</sup> Street Beach. We hadn't seen one of those since we were in Kenya thirty years ago. But this is post-pandemic Chicago, where lawless behavior sometimes seems more the norm than the exception. The next day we learned that what we thought was a sleeping hippo was in fact a hijacked Kia. It's a mystery to me why anyone would steal a car, then drive it off the road onto the beach, put it in drive, gun the motor, jump out, and watch it take off into the deep. It's not as if it could skim the surface of the water, but maybe the idiot who stole the car considered that a possibility.

There's usually much less drama visible from our east-facing windows on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor, except the drama of many a blinding sunrise, or the sudden appearance of tumultuous storm-clouds, or of sudden flashes of lightning or illegal fireworks, or of the occasional rainbow. But if I sit in the right place at the dining table early in the morning, especially on those hazy days where the mist (or these days, more likely, the smoke) obscures the view of Michigan City eighty miles across, and if I can block out the view of the rooftop gargoyles in Jackson Towers next door, I can imagine that the lake is really a limitless sea, and I am sitting there afloat in my own private fishing boat. I can imagine that the water treatment installation a mile or so across is some kind of phantom ship, searching desperately for a port in the coming storm.

Lake Michigan, of course, is not the sea. Neither is the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is in comparison just a smallish lake, situated in northern Israel just south of the Golan Heights and the Lebanese border. An inland sea just eight kilometers across, emptying into the Jordan River, it's dwarfed next to the vast expanse of Lake Michigan. The "Sea of Galilee," as it's called in Matthew, Mark, and John (Luke knew better), is more accurately called Lake Kinneret or, as the Romans referred to it, Lake Tiberias.

But size isn't everything. The Sea of Galilee is both the geographical and the imaginative center of the Gospel writings. Think of how many stories about Jesus center on this lake: it's in a synagogue near the lake where Jesus first proclaims he has come to liberate the captives just as Isaiah predicted; it's on the shore of that lake where Jesus persuaded Andrew, Peter, James, and John to abandon their nets and leave their hapless father in the lurch. It's in the Sea of Galilee where Jesus produced a miraculous haul of fishes that almost capsized the disciples' boat. It's the windswept lake where Jesus calmed the storm that broke out while he was sleeping in the hold of his disciples' fishing boat. Jesus preached the sermon on the mount on a precipice overlooking the water. It's on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where the resurrected Jesus spooked his disciples and invited them to a barbeque breakfast on the beach. Think of how many times Jesus is said to cross from one side of the lake to the other—from the Judean fishing ports on the west to the pagan fishing ports on the east, and then back again. In the gospel stories, the Sea of Galilee is both a threshold and a staging point. As a threshold, the lake geographically both separates and connects the circumcised and the uncircumcised, Galileans and non-Galileans, Jews and Gentiles. But the sea is also a kind of stage

set, a watery performance space where pivotal moments in the drama of salvation take place—a watery platform for miracles.

And here we are again at the Sea of Galilee in this morning's story. Once again the disciples are trapped in the middle of the lake, quaking with fear, searching vainly for a port in the storm. The story is ripe for a miracle. But as usual with gospel miracles, there's more here than meets the eye, like that hippopotamus stranded off the 57<sup>th</sup> Street beach. Listen carefully.

*Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.*

From the very first sentence, there's something odd, even a bit sinister, about this story. Matthew writes that Jesus *made* the disciples get in the boat. It feels a bit like a set-up. Did he know a storm was brewing? And in spite of that, did he insist that they get in the boat anyway. Is he setting them up for a rescue?

Perhaps I am reading too closely here. But I have learned watch out for nuance in these gospel stories, especially stories like this that in our collective memories have become so cut and dried, so to speak. To *make* someone to do something is different from inviting them or urging them. It's as if the disciples were left with no choice but to set across the

stormy lake, perhaps against their better judgment, with the wind against them, and the opposite shore lost in the swirling mists. They end up stranded out there for the entire stormy night, fearing for their lives. What was Jesus up to?

*And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.*

You see what I meant when I called the lake a performance space? It's as if Jesus conjured up the storm in order to demonstrate both his power and his compassion—his power to roil the waves, but then, out of genuine compassion for their plight, also to teach them something about himself—to overpower the churning waves by calmly walking upon them. It reminds me that he waited four days to get back to Bethany after Lazarus died, in order, John tells us, that he might show his real power. And in this morning's story, ordered out out to sea, and then stranded and terrified in the storm, they are even more terrified when they see Jesus calmly walking toward them on the waves. "It is a ghost," they cried out in fear. Wouldn't you?

*But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."*

Who knows what really happened on that stormy night. It's well to remember, though, that Matthew was not writing eye-witness history. He was writing not as an historical witness to what Jesus did, but as spiritual witness as to who Jesus was and is, for

Matthew's own community of believers, struggling against the oppression of Roman power and the skepticism of their fellow Jews. We preserve these writings—we call them sacred, in fact—because they also speak to us, in spite of our radically different cultural and historical context. The storm is not just on the lake. The storm is all around us, as it was all around Matthew's first readers and hearers. What Matthew cares about is that we understand who Jesus can be for us in the midst of the storm—whether storms that beset us from outside or internal storms of our own making. Jesus *made* the disciples set sail. It's as if he knew that we have no choice but to *face* the storms that threaten us, secure only in the conviction that, in the end, God does not abandon us. *Take heart*, he says, his voice rising above the chaos of the storm, *take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*

*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!"*

I'm with Peter on this, and so, I suspect, are most of us. It's not easy for us to negotiate the storms that roil our lives. How often as followers of Jesus, as Christian people, have we thought we knew where we were and who we were and what we stood for, willing to walk on water if we have to, ready to act with firmness against bigots and with compassion for the oppressed, to act as Jesus would have us act—how often have we failed to live up to

our best intentions, especially when the strong winds of ignorance and racism and oppression blow as hard as they do today, threatening to immerse us. Especially now, when hatred and prejudice seem poised to overwhelm the public square, I for one am to tempted fall back in retreat, silent in the face of injustice, sinking in the maelstrom of doubt, devoid of courage.

*Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."*

None of us is meant to walk on water, but walking on water is not what this story is about. It's about trust. It's about hope. It's about being sure in the conviction that whatever storms threaten to engulf us—whether our own interior storms—our deepest losses, our depression maybe, our resentments, our anger with others and the anger of others toward us—or perhaps it's the more public storms, storms that in these days of climate change and resurgent fascism are both natural and all-too-human—God is there ahead of us, always on the side of the oppressed and the victimized, a God who would dare to walk on water if it meant that the world would be saved. None of us is Jesus. We are all bunglers like Peter. But trying to meet Jesus at least halfway is the least we can do.

It helps to keep a sense of humor about this. There are very few Christians who knew how

to negotiate the storms of hatred and bigotry than Desmond Tutu. But he was nothing if not realistic. I once heard him tell this story on himself. In the dark days of apartheid in the 1980s, Tutu imagined a situation where P.W. Botha, the notoriously racist prime minister of South Africa at the time, was shouting for help, stranded by himself on a small boat in churning seas. Standing on the shore, hearing Botha's cries of distress, Tutu imagined himself striding into the sea, walking on water as Jesus did, holding out a rescuing hand to his arch-enemy. Tutu then turned to us with a chuckle and quoted what he was sure would be the headline in the next day's morning paper: BREAKING NEWS: TUTU CAN'T SWIM.