



## THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

7 August 2005

Pastor Don Marxhausen

I Kings 19:9-18

Psalm 85

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

### “Faith in the Midst of Chaos”

Psalm 77: 16

When the waters saw you O God

When the waters saw you, they were afraid;

The very deep trembled

The clouds poured out water;

The skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side.

The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;

Your lightning's lit up the world;

The earth trembled and shook.

Your way was through the sea,

Your path, through the mighty waters;

Yet *your* footprints were unseen.

You led your people like a flock.

Core to the faith of Israel was its birth not only out of slavery but also out of the chaos of water. “ While God was beginning to create the heavens and the earth darkness was upon the face of the deep.” And for life to begin the chaos had to sorted out. The dry land from the face of the deep.

In biblical thought the sea itself connotes the forces of chaos, held at bay in the creative act of God, but always threatening. To the biblical mind, being on the sea is itself a threat, representing all the anxieties and dark powers that threaten the goodness of the created order. To be at sea evokes images of death of the active power that is the goodness of life. The sea in our gospel separates the disciples from Jesus, who represents the presence of God. It is reminiscent of the sea that separated the Hebrew slaves from certain death on one side and freedom and a future on the other. In the midst of the chaos of the world, the disciples like us are left alone in the boat/church (The nave),with only their fragile craft preserving them from its threat, buffeted by the stormy winds of conflict and persecution, temptations trials and doubt.

And like the story of Jesus calming the sea, we are those in the boat. It is not just the apostles that are in the boat but all believers are in the endangered ship and dependant upon their savior. *We, too, are those caught midway between faith and doubt.*

Is Iraq and the theory of the American Empire going to pull us so far down that we will be limping along for decades?

Is our ELCA going to come apart in Orlando over the issue of Gays receiving full inclusion in the church?

Can St. Paul take on the renovations that it seeks in order to make this building fully functionally for us and the community.

Can the issues that tug on most of us be overcome? Will we be sustained?

The sea is so large and our boat is so small.

In 1961 I worked at a Lutheran family camp in Willsboro, New York, which was up on the very wild Lake Champlain. We didn't have a dock or a raft, but a large pontoon. A group of us young men feeling that we were supermen, detached it from its anchor one day, flipped it over and striding the large sides paddled the pontoon out into the lake with long rowing oars. We had a sense of being Vikings when in fact we were idiots. The wind blew up. Lighting started, rain came. Using all the power of six young men we paddled and went nowhere. We then caught (by some gift) a good wind that helped us paddle toward shore where we could then tow the pontoon back to camp about a half a mile away stumbling on the rocks along the shore. Biblical images as well as those of the Titanic came to our minds. Jesus, please calm the sea. We fantasized about headlines in newspaper, "Six young men fried in Lake Champlain." Our boat was so small.

Three years ago my wife and I attended an AME church in Lisle, Illinois. Judy and I were the only three White folks in the place of about 600. Such a service is at least three hours long. The drummer was so enthusiastic that they had to put up a plastic wall so no one got hit by his sticks. Visitors which numbered about thirty had to get up and introduce ourselves. Then we sat down and the congregation stood up and faced us and sang, "There is a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in This Place." Anyway, the preacher was Baptist. He was a guest that Sunday. An old civil rights warrior. Part of Martin Luther King's inner circle when he came to Chicago.

He said:

I am in a storm. Are some of you in a storm? I have had cancer for several years that was supposed to kill me a few years back. It eventually will, so I am in a storm. Are you in a storm? In life you are either entering a storm, in a storm or coming out of a storm. Some people think storms won't happen.

They build on sand

They put no life preservers on board

Or they never try to get to the other side. They prefer to live where life does not happen or where they can nurture their fear.

But storms happen? What or Who do you reach for in the middle of such a time?

About ten years ago I mentioned in a sermon at St. Philip Lutheran that the Red Sea according to the Rabbis did not part until the first Jew stepped into the water. After the service some old lady who was visiting the church grabbed me by the chest and said, "You keep telling those young people to step into the water?" "Yes, Ma'am." It took me a while to grow those chest hairs back.

During the modern period, following the Enlightenment, society was so relieved that there was something more than faith. There was mathematical equations, chemical formulas, eventually atomic microscopes, predictability, geometrical end points and mankind thought it was going to get a handle on all of this. WE will create the future. WE will overcome nature. WE will become as gods. In the post-modern era we now know that we are in boats far from shore, chaos is a part of reality and

predictability is within some mathematical variance. In other words we still have to live between faith and doubt. Perhaps a more informed faith and doubt but still a faith in the face of doubt.

The knowledge of faith is not as certain as the knowledge of science, yet it speaks of realities that are of more ultimate importance than the things we can see and touch. *To believe in the saving power of Jesus is to take a risk.*

In the storm.... in our little boat.... Jesus says through word, sacrament, through the presence of family and community, "Take heart, it is I, do NOT be afraid." And to Peter and to me He says (And maybe to some of you), "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" It doesn't say, "those of NO faith," but of little faith.

In the Fourth Gospel believing is always a verb, never a noun; faith is not a possession, but an activity. It is like a song that disappears when we stop singing. Those of little faith are warned that they must exercise their little faith or it will wither away like an unused muscle.

Doubt raises its stormy head and it often looks like "The Perfect Storm," but it is kept in subordination by grace. Like the epileptic's father in the gospel of Mark, each Christian must pray continually, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

In the third "Indiana Jones" movie, Indiana Jones in order to get to the Holy Grail has to step out onto the "Bridge of Faith" that he cannot see. In reality God does not call us to stop thinking or to risk our lives and welfare pointlessly.

Our oldest grandson, Luke, is much of the time timid and cautious. He is twenty nine months old. However, when we were in Singapore in June and in a swimming pool each day, Luke would run as fast as his little legs would carry him and jump off the side into the deep water. Where did he get this sudden courage? His father was there to catch him each time. So is ours when we get in touch with faith.

So what is this rebuke when Peter starts to sink? \*\*Perhaps Jesus was speaking as a friend. Perhaps he knows and accepts Peter's limitations and what he is saying is, "you were doing it! You had it! Don't lose that!" Faith is never settled once for all. I grasp God, or more accurately, for a moment I realize that God grasps me, and then I lose that knowledge. I never get to check off "have faith" on my list of accomplishments.\*\*

Each of us here in different and various ways are either going into a storm, in the storm or coming out of the storm. In the storm we are pushing that boat against some scary winds and waves, or looking for faith to do what has to be done. And it isn't the test that seems to be overwhelming it is the sense of worth in the midst of the challenge. \*\*And I have felt so often the many ways Jesus reaches out his hand to catch me—in the love of family and friends, the sustenance of spiritual practice, the bonds of community and the moments of the presence of the Spirit that seems to come from no where to raise me up.\*\*

And it doesn't matter if I am walking on water, but that I am walking toward Jesus, whose hand is held toward me, stretched out to grasp me should I fall.

In the literature of many cultures deities walk on water, subdue seas, and calm winds. We are not deities. We have to "walk by faith and not by sight."

And we have to reach out or up or somewhere and discover that hand that sustains us and makes us whole and gives us courage. A great hymn for today would be “What Wondrous Love” where a verse says:

When I was sinking down, sinking down  
When I was sinking down, sinking down  
When I was sinking down beneath God’s righteous frown,  
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul  
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul.

Or as we will sing in a few minutes:

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn,  
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

His footprints cannot be seen, yet the journey continues for each of us, for all of us together; Gays, Straight, Black, White, Brown and Yellow; Old and Young; shades of this belief and that belief; sinners redeemed, loved and forgiven. Accepted and made whole.

We cannot find success by Kevin’s good theological preaching, nor Mark’s good music, nor by the sound of the good organ, nor by our good works in the community, nor by our accepting of various differences in the human spectrum. We in this ship, this nave, sail by faith and trust that God will bring us to the shore where we belong. Going into the storm, in the storm, coming out of the storm we know to whom we belong. It is not by our rowing or paddling, but by His grace. AMEN

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I brought from home a picture that reveals much of who I am (and it may be you as well) and I would like you to listen to this song as the period of silence. It has been on quite a few radio stations.

\*\*Taken from Christian Century July 26 Issue