

Matthew 14:22-33 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,^[a] for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind,^[b] he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

"WHEN THE WINDS ARE AGAINST US"

Matthew 14:25-33

Here's what I want to say to you today. It comes from the passage in Matthew 14. When the winds are against us, Jesus comes to his church, saying, "Take heart. It is; do not be afraid." Now that's a long sentence so I'm going to break it up into three parts.

First, "When the winds are against us."

Just before this incident Jesus had fed the crowds by multiplying five loaves and two fish. Right then and there, the people wanted to make him king. But Jesus sent his disciples in the boat across to the other side of the lake. Then Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. No doubt the temptation to grasp earthly power was very great. So Jesus prayed for a long time up there seeking strength to keep going to the cross. Meanwhile, the boat was making little or no headway on the lake. "The boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them."

Have you ever felt the wind blowing hard against you? Yes, you have. Sometimes it blows so hard that it will take your hat off or turn your umbrella inside out. Or it can bring you to a complete standstill, even move you backwards.

There are other kinds of winds that can be against us. Life can bring some pretty harsh realities which block our progress and even send us in the wrong direction. We can suffer setbacks in our health, our job situation, our finances, our relationships. Though we are making progress, the COVID-19 pandemic has pretty much stopped us all in our tracks.

And what about the church? It's interesting that the image for the early church was a boat floating on turbulent waters. It's an image for the church in our day. For the winds of secular culture certainly seem to be blowing hard against the church. Some churches are thriving and growing, but there seems to be just as many that are closing or consolidating. Of course, there is nothing like the truth and promise of the Gospel message with the Crucified and Risen One at its center. We all, every one of us, need it. Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself." But there are so many competing activities, all of which seem more attractive on the surface than what the church offers. Secular substitutes for the Gospel seem to fill our spiritual need for a time, but ultimately leave people hopeless and lost.

Then there are the doubters and deniers and scoffers who always seem to get a lot of publicity. The world may appreciate the good works the church does in community and the world. But the world doesn't want to have anything to do with the God who inspires those works and the Christ in whose Name they are done. It's almost as if a demonic force is propelling the winds against the church. Maybe there really is. In our personal lives and in the church, we know what it is like to have the wind against us. "When the winds are against us, Jesus comes to his church, saying, "Take heart. It is; do not be afraid."

Now let's look at this second part, "Jesus comes to his church."

Verse 25 "And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea." We shouldn't be surprised that the Son of God could do such a thing. He had just been spending much time with his Father in prayer. So he was fully infused with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now we often use this image of walking on the water as a source of humor. For example, it's said that congregations often want their pastor to walk on water. Ads from churches looking for a new clergyperson may say something like, "Come and be our walk on water minister." My response would be, "Sure, if you walk on water with me."

A congregation called its first female minister and ran into a concern from two male elders who enjoyed an annual fishing trip with the preacher. What should they do? Well, they invited her to come along. To their surprise, she accepted. They all arrived and hopped in the boat. Some distance out, they realized they had forgotten their bait. The minister jumped up, said she would get it, stepped out of the boat and walked across the water to shore. "Look at that," said one of the men, "she can't even swim!"

Now I am pleased you that the congregation has called a new minister to begin right after I retire. I know that Jessica can very much count on your support, just as I have always been very well supported. I'm sure Jessica will do good work among you. She may be able to swim but she won't be able to walk on water. And no church should expect that.

"Early in the morning Jesus came walking to them on the sea." But there is another smaller miracle here, too. In order to get to the boat, Jesus put his head down and overcome the winds that were blowing against the boat and against him too. Those strong winds could not keep him away from his disciples. And that was a miracle, too.

You see, the very winds that blow hard against the church today blew hard against Jesus too. Actually they blew against him with demonic force. In his lifetime Jesus experienced harsh winds of misunderstanding, rejection, temptation, disappointment, betrayal, attacks from Satan, fear, and death itself. And yet the Son of God overcame all the bitter winds that blew so strongly against him. He did it by his utter dependence on God and God's word, his obedience unto death on the cross for our sin, and his glorious resurrection victory. He overcame the contrary winds that stagger us and hold us back and even bring death to us.

And the winds that blow against us now are blowing against Christ too, for he identifies so closely with his church and his people. But despite these harsh winds the living Christ comes to his church. No power can keep him away from us. Christ always comes to his people over the churning waves. He comes to you and me. He comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. He meets us in word and sacrament in and the fellowship of his church. No ill wind in life or in death can keep Christ away from his people.

And his very presence brings new life to the church. I was just reading this week about the Orthodox Church in Russia. For decades the winds of official atheism blew hard against the Christian church in Russia. The goal was to wipe out the church for good. By 1991 there were only 6,000 church buildings left in Russia. The flames flickered but the embers never died out. And over the past 30 years the Russian Orthodox Church has undergone a great revival, and it is now one of the strongest and most faithful churches anywhere,

standing firm in faith and witness. Now there are over 40,000 churches in Russia; 1,000 new churches being built every year. It's a mighty work of God through his Living Son, our Lord Jesus Christ who comes to his church without fail. And he will do a similar work here too, in this land, if we are willing.

Finally, let's consider Jesus' words, "*Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid.*"

Jesus comes to the church in the howling gale, assuring us of his presence. "It is I." He also imparts courage to us, his courage. "Take heart, don't be afraid." Well, Peter was certainly given courage, wasn't he? He wanted to go out to Jesus on the water. Jesus invited him out. And for a short time Peter did indeed walk on the water towards Jesus.

Isn't that what the church and all of us need in these days when the winds are against us? We need courage to step out of the comfort zone, to try new things for Jesus, to spread the Gospel, to help the church grow.

Maybe some of you will be given courage to try something new when church gets back to normal and we're all safe again. Perhaps you will ask someone to come to church with you, someone who doesn't normally attend or hasn't been coming for a while. There will be a fresh face, a new voice here. So you can say, "Come and see. Come and hear our new minister." Even when the winds are against the church, the church has always grown through personal witness and invitation.

You say, "But I'm scared to do this. My fear is holding me back." Jesus says to you, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." You say, "But what if it doesn't work, what if I fail?" Jesus says, "Even if your courage fails and you stumble, I am here to help you. For I am your Saviour. I have already saved you from the power of sin and death. You are mine forever. Nothing in all creation can separate you from my love."

Peter was walking on the water towards Jesus. But he was distracted by the winds and began to sink, so he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

And notice this. Even before Peter had a chance to reach out to Jesus, Jesus' hand was right there, catching Peter. Sometimes our faith is shaky, sometimes we are fearful, sometimes we doubt. But it's not the strength of our faith that saves us. It's his strength that saves us. When the winds are against us, Jesus comes to his church, saying, "Take heart; It is I. Do not be afraid." Don't be afraid, because Christ's saving power is stronger than our weakness; his hold on us is stronger than our fears; his promise to us is stronger than our doubts.

The story ends, "When he got into boat together with all the disciples, the wind ceased." Well, Jesus' presence does that because he is greater than the winds that blow hard against us. He brings us a great peace. And here is the witness of the church, both on earth and in heaven. Together with the disciples on Galilee and followers through all the ages we fall on our knees and worship him saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."