

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 9, 2026
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Frazier
Matthew 14:22-33

There is a tendency to read the gospel story we just heard as a lesson about faith versus doubt. Peter steps out of the boat. Peter loses courage. Peter begins to sink. And certainly, that is part of the story.

But Matthew is asking a bigger question than whether Peter has enough faith. The deeper question is: **Who is Jesus?** What kind of Lord walks on the stormy sea (like he was strolling on a golf course fairway)? What kind of God speaks to a storm and the waters obey? What kind of ruler has authority over those powers that terrify humanity?

To get to the heart of this story, it's important to understand the symbolism of the sea in Scripture. For us, the sea is often a place of vacation, recreation, or beauty. For ancient Israel, it was something much more dangerous. The sea represented chaos, threat, unpredictability, and the powers opposed to God's purposes.

When Jesus walks upon the sea, Matthew is not merely showing us a miracle. He is proclaiming a political, theological, and cosmic truth: ***The powers that threaten God's creation are not ultimate. Christ is Lord over them all.***

The Bible begins with water. In Genesis, before creation is ordered, "darkness covered the face of the deep." The Hebrew imagination often understood the deep waters as symbols of primordial chaos. Creation itself is God's act of bringing order, life, and flourishing out of the waters.

Again and again throughout Scripture, the sea represents forces beyond human control. The Psalms speak of God setting boundaries for the waters. Psalm 89 declares: "You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them." Job marvels that God alone shut in the sea with doors. The sea is never an independent rival to God. Yet it symbolizes everything that resists God's life-giving order.

In Israel's story, the sea appears wherever God's people encounter overwhelming danger. The Red Sea stands between Israel and liberation. The flood waters threaten creation itself. Jonah is swallowed amid the tumultuous sea. The sea often becomes a picture of all those realities that make human beings feel small, vulnerable, and powerless.

The disciples know this symbolism. When they see Jesus walking on the water, they are not simply impressed by an unusual feat. They know they are witnessing a revelation. Only God exercises dominion over the deep.

The symbolism of the sea does not stop with nature. Throughout Scripture, the sea also represents political power. This is particularly evident in the Book of Daniel. There the terrifying empires of the world arise from the sea: beastly

kingdoms emerging from the chaotic waters. The sea is the birthplace of oppressive power. Similarly, the Book of Revelation presents the beast rising from the sea to make war against the saints.

The symbolism is striking. The sea is not merely nature. It is the realm from which systems of domination emerge. Violence. Empire. Exploitation. Idolatrous politics. Economic oppression. Military arrogance. The deep becomes a symbol for those forces that seem larger than any individual and impossible to resist.

Ancient Israel knew these realities through Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The people of God repeatedly faced powers that appeared invincible. Yet Scripture consistently proclaims that those powers are not God. They may rage like oceans. They may appear immeasurable. But God remains sovereign over them.

When Jesus walks across the sea, he is walking across every claim made by these powers. He is demonstrating not simply authority over nature but authority over every force that threatens God's people. The sea beneath his feet becomes an image of all dominion being placed beneath his lordship.

Notice where the disciples are. They are in a boat. The boat is being battered by waves. The wind is against them. Matthew tells us it is the fourth watch of the night, somewhere between 3:00 and 6:00 in the morning. The darkest part of the night. The hour when exhaustion and fear are at their greatest. This

image has often served as a symbol of the Church. The Church finds itself tossed by powerful forces. Sometimes political. Sometimes economic. Sometimes cultural. Sometimes spiritual.

The disciples are not in danger because they were disobedient. They are in danger because they obeyed Jesus. He is the one who sent them into the boat (v. 22). This is important. Faithfulness does not exempt God's people from storms. The Church often assumes that if we are doing God's will, the waters will be calm. But Scripture tells another story.

Sometimes obedience places us precisely where the winds are strongest. The disciples are exactly where Christ told them to be, and still they are struggling. Many Christians today know this feeling. We look at political polarization. Climate crises. Economic instability. Wars. Mass displacement of peoples. Growing inequalities. The erosion of trust. The rise of authoritarian movements around the world. The sheer complexity of technological and economic systems.

These forces can feel like enormous waves breaking over the sides of our little boat. The Church sometimes feels small and vulnerable. The disciples did too.

Then comes the heart of the story. Jesus approaches. Walking upon the sea. And he says: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." In Greek, Jesus says *ego*

eimi. Literally: “**I am.**” The phrase echoes the divine name revealed to Moses. This is more than reassurance. This is revelation.

The disciples are not merely being told that their teacher has arrived. They are being confronted with the presence of the God of Israel. The One who parted the Red Sea. The One who subdued the waters of chaos. The One who rules over every empire and every age.

The central Christian claim is not that storms are unreal. Nor is it that the powers of the world are insignificant. The claim is that Christ is greater. The Church does not survive because it possesses greater resources, superior influence, or political dominance. The Church survives because the crucified and risen Lord reigns over all things.

Peter asks for permission to come. And Jesus says: "Come." Peter walks. For a moment he participates in the very authority of Christ. He moves across that which should have swallowed him. Yet when Peter shifts his attention from Jesus to the wind, fear begins to overwhelm him. He sinks.

We often interpret this as an individual lesson about personal faith. But there is also a communal lesson. The Church is always tempted to become fixated on the wind. On crises. On threats. On enemies. On polls. On markets. On politics. On whatever is dominating the headlines. When fear becomes our primary lens, we begin to sink into despair or compromise. The answer is not denial of reality. Peter was right: the wind was real. The waves were real. The

danger was real. The answer is remembering that Christ remains Lord even in the midst of those realities. Every generation has its version of the sea.

Today our seas may look different from those of ancient Rome. The waters may take the form of global financial systems that seem untouchable. They may appear as technological infrastructures shaping human attention and desire. They may emerge as nationalism, racism, consumerism, or ecological destruction. They may be systems that convince people they are powerless to change anything. The genius of domination is always the same. It persuades us that it is inevitable. That there is no alternative. That resistance is futile. That history belongs to the powerful.

Scripture rejects this claim. Again and again, God acts against what appears inevitable. The Exodus from Egypt was impossible. The exile to Babylon seemed final. The cross looked like defeat. Yet God overturned every verdict. The resurrection itself is God's declaration that neither death nor empire has the final word. Christ's lordship subordinates every earthly authority. No nation is ultimate. No market is ultimate. No ideology is ultimate. No empire is ultimate. No ruler is ultimate. Only Christ.

The story ends with worship. The wind ceases. And the disciples declare: "Truly you are the Son of God." Notice that worship emerges from divine encounter. Not from escape from danger. Not from political victory. Not from the destruction of enemies. Worship arises because they have seen who Jesus truly is.

The calm is important. The revelation is even more important. The point of the story is not merely that Jesus can solve problems. The point is that Jesus is Lord. The One whom winds obey. The One before whom chaos yields. The One whom even the deep cannot resist.

We live in an age of turbulent waters. Many feel overwhelmed by forces too vast to comprehend and too powerful to confront. The storms are real. The waves are real. The winds are real. But the Gospel gives the Church a vision for such times. The sea is not empty. The waters are not sovereign. The powers are not ultimate. Christ comes walking across everything that terrifies us. Across chaos. Across empire. Across violence. Across death itself. And his word to the Church remains unchanged: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

The good news of the gospel is not that there are no storms. The good news is that the Lord of creation stands above them. The powers of this world rage like the sea. But the sea is beneath his feet. And therefore, with hope and courage, the Church can confess with the disciples: “Truly you are the Son of God.”