

## **Pentecost 10A, Proper 14.**

### **Jesus Walking on the Water. August 13, 2017.**

Jesus is coming to us, over the waters, through the turbulence and danger, bringing peace and the kingdom of God. We who are drowning will be lifted up by the savior's hands, pulled from the depths of chaos and into the loving embrace of God. This is beautiful and comforting. This story has comforted many people who have felt buffeted by waves and endangered by winds and as if the water were up to their neck for centuries. But today there is a great risk of it becoming saccharine, of us hearing it and thinking "yes, Jesus will get here if we just hunker down in the boat and keep the faith." I think this is entirely the wrong way to be affected by this story, and to avoid the saccharine promises of stagnation, I'd like to dig into the backstory a little bit.

Our story this morning launches into the events in the middle of the night, but there's a whole lot that has just happened that we haven't read. This sequence begins with the murder by the governor of John the Baptist. John was Jesus' cousin and colleague and he was arrested for condemning the sins of the governor, Herod. Herod was unwilling to kill him for fear of the crowds but he basically loses a bet with an erotic dancer who happens to be his niece and stepdaughter and so ends up beheading John to please his powerful friends. A crass, crude, lecherous ruler kills John to save face in front of his partners in petty tyranny.

Jesus hears about his cousin's death and it's the first big crisis of his ministry. If John can be killed by the government for telling the truth to the powerful, then Jesus is also a marked man. Jesus tries to withdraw to a lonely place to mourn his friend and to pray, but the crowds figure out where he's going and they meet him there on the other side of the lake. And so he spends the day healing them and at the end of the day when they're hungry, he turns five loaves and two fishes into a meal for five thousand men and uncounted women and children. It is at the end of this day that he sends the disciples to the boat, finally takes the time to pray in solitude, and then comes across the waters and saves Peter.

I want to talk about this background because I think it matters very much who this Jesus is who walks on water; who this is who does the impossible and calls us out to do the same. He isn't just a divine life raft to cling to when we are in trouble. The background of the story is one of standing up to the wicked who are in power, healing the sick, and feeding the hungry. The metaphor of Jesus picking us up out of the waters certainly includes our personal, private travails, but it cannot be limited to them. It also involves social things like hunger, the illness of others, the sins of the powerful.

We have to remember this because this weekend Nazis marched through the streets of Virginia, resulting in at least one death. And we're not talking about folks who like to dress up for Civil War reenactments and drink beer on the weekend, but predominantly young white men who are hoping and working for a world in which Blacks are enslaved, Jews and queer folks are murdered by the millions, and anyone whose first language isn't English or whose skin is brown is deported or imprisoned. We are talking about redeemable people, children of God, who are giving themselves to wickedness, to the sins of racism and nationalism, to Satan. Not a single one of those boys in their polo shirts with their Wal-Mart tiki torches is beyond the love of God. But the alt-right: anti-immigrant, nationalist, racist, homophobic, and violent is demonic. The

church resists it not because it's bad politics, but because it is evil theology that denies the primacy of the universally stamped image of God in favor of the idols of whiteness and Americanism. It is an affront to God. And that means that we resist their hatred and violence with truth and a sacrificial love first to those they threaten and also to them. Make no mistake, their souls will not be saved by our silence. We must love them and resist them; we must love them by resisting them.

Now it may seem like we've strayed pretty far from Jesus walking on the waters. But the question is what the waters are that Jesus conquers. Ancient thought often cast the waters as chaos, and creation accounts—including the creation account in Genesis—often included a scene where the deity conquered the chaos by setting limits to the waters. Water was the enemy. What are the waters of today over which Jesus is still walking: the threatening, mysterious, uncontrollable forces that push us away from where we'd like to be and put us all in great danger? Yes of course the waters are our own despair and weariness and fear. Absolutely. But also the white supremacy and greed and hatred that rule our world.

First, Jesus is more powerful than these, doing the impossible by striding atop them, beyond their power for drowning and destruction. But I'm not sure how much comfort that is to us this morning. No, the real rub in this story is not that Jesus does the impossible; it is that Jesus enables us to do the impossible. Jesus calls Peter out into the waters, to do what no one can do, to walk along the waters towards Jesus. Towards that life that tells the powerful when they are wicked, gives balm to those who are ill, and fills the hungry with good things.

We too, like Peter, are called out into the waters of our time to do the impossible. And as we go, we are moving toward Jesus. We are called, astonishingly, to defeat hatred without compromising on love. We are called to hope and to articulate hope so beautifully that even the devils are converted. We do it by naming sin even among the powerful and by creating communities that care for the ill and feed the hungry. We are called to do it even by putting our bodies on the line to defend our assurance that all people are created in the image of God, with the inherent worth and dignity of God's very own image.

Of course we can't do it. It is God who does it through us and God who enables us to play our part. Of course we will fail and start to sink. This is inevitable. But the God who enables us to do it is the same who will catch us as we fall. And all along, as we try and fail and get up and in a million tiny ways build a world where Nazism is an impossibility, we are walking towards our Lord in whom is the victory. I am assured that Christ is coming. Let us be sure that we are moving to meet him.