

August 13, 2017

**IN TIME OF NEED**  
Matthew 14.22-31

Rev. Frank Breisch

I grew up in the Golden Age of the B Western.  
The names of Tom Mix, Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry and the Lone Ranger  
dominated the Silver Screen of my childhood.  
Those Westerns were all comedies--not in the sense that they played for laughs,  
but in the classical sense of the word;  
you could always be sure that the good guys would win  
and the villainies of the bad guys would be thwarted or avenged

The Gospel lesson we read this morning is somewhat like that.  
It seems quite certain that Matthew's Gospel was written for a church  
that was facing opposition and perhaps persecution.  
It seems that some Christian teachers were advising the Christians to hide their faith,  
to be quiet about it, so that they could avoid being persecuted.  
Matthew is concerned that the church shall be faithful  
to its task of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ,  
so he has shaped the gospel tradition to emphasize the importance of  
standing up for Christ and speaking out for Christ  
even when it means being persecuted.  
And he emphasizes the fact that Christ will never leave his persecuted church alone.

It's not hard to see how the story we read fits that emphasis.  
After the feeding of the 5000, Jesus told his disciples to leave in the boat  
while he dismissed the crowd.  
Then Jesus spent time alone in prayer, while his disciples rowed across the Sea of Galilee.  
But a storm came up quite suddenly and they were unable to make any progress  
against the waves and the wind.  
In that terrifying situation, the disciples were further terrified  
by the sight of a person walking toward them on top of the water!  
"It's a ghost," they concluded fearfully.  
But Jesus responded, "Don't worry! It is I. Don't be afraid!"

Peter's response was typical of Peter--brash and impetuous, but also trusting and  
confident. "Let me come to you on the water." and Jesus replied, "Come!"  
I think most of us would have gotten out of the boat one foot at a time,  
testing the first one to make sure it would hold us up before we tried the second.  
But I can see Peter putting his hands on the gunwales and vaulting out, both feet  
together! And the water held him! "Wow! This is great!" And he started walking toward  
Jesus.  
But a big wave came toward him, and he suddenly realized that he was walking in a storm

that had been threatening their boat, and fear took over.  
And when fear replaced faith, Peter began to sink.  
"Help, Lord!" And Jesus strode over to him, grabbed his arm,  
and pulled him back to the top of the water.  
"Oh, Peter! Where is your faith? Did you think I'd let you sink?"  
Together they walked back to the boat and climbed in, and when they did so,  
the storm suddenly and inexplicably stopped.  
And all the disciples were amazed and worshipped Jesus and declared,  
"Truly, you are the Son of God."

Can't you see how this story spoke to those persecuted Christians?  
The storm of persecution was raging, and they were caught in it.  
How tempting it would be to flee to the harbour of silence  
and hide there until the storm was over!  
But Matthew is reminding them that they are safe in the middle of the storm,  
because Jesus is with them.  
He has promised that he will never leave them nor forsake them, and he keeps his  
promises! If they keep their faith in Jesus strong,  
they will not only be protected from the wind and the waves,  
but will be able to walk on the water.

But does the message of this passage fit the real world in which we live day by day?  
Or does it belong to a never-never land like my childhood movies?

Well, those early Christians were not naive.  
They knew the story of Stephen; his martyrdom was celebrated in the church.  
They knew that God had freed Peter from prison when Herod planned to kill him,  
but that God had allowed Herod to kill James.  
But above all they knew the story of Jesus.  
They knew full well that Jesus had been crucified,  
sent to his death by the same Jewish authorities who threatened them.  
They had no illusions that this story was some sort of magical guarantee  
that they would sail through the storm of persecution unscathed.  
But they also knew that Jesus' death led to his resurrection,  
that his suffering led to his glory.  
And they understood the symbolism of this story in the light of those facts.  
The promise of this story was not that they would be saved from suffering  
but that suffering and even death could never separate them  
from their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ  
and from the eternal life with the Father which Jesus gave them.

This story was about the real world,  
because the promise it gave them went deeper than the surface.  
It was anchored on the bedrock of God's amazing, eternal, unchanging love for them  
which would never fail them  
even in the worst circumstances in which life could trap them.

A promise like that is not just for times of persecution.  
When Paul talks about all the things that cannot separate us from the love of God,  
the first thing he mentions is death. T  
That's what Matthew's first readers had to fear:  
the final death of execution or the living death of imprisonment.  
But the second thing Paul mentions is life.  
And there's a lot to fear in life, too.  
If we stop to think about all the horrible things that could happen to us in our lifetimes,  
we can make a fearful list!  
And if we had to rank them in order of their personal impact on us,  
we'd all have different lists,  
because we all have fears and dreads that are peculiarly our own.  
For some of us who enjoy good health,  
the handicaps of chronic disease may seem like a terrible burden.  
But some people bear those burdens so well that I am amazed.

But each of us has our own list of fears and dreads.  
And those fears can immobilize us.  
Many of us, for example, have a very low view of ourselves.  
We have convinced ourselves, usually for reasons which go back to our childhood,  
that we are worthless.  
When people compliment us, or when we succeed in accomplishing something,  
we are sure that's not the real Me.  
We've just managed to pull the wool over their eyes for awhile,  
and sooner or later they'll discover what lousy people we are.  
We live with the fear of being discovered!  
And often that fear keeps us from attempting things that we could do very well,  
or makes us snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Whatever our fears, we all need the simple but important lesson  
that Matthew wants to teach us.  
We need to know, in the depths of our hearts, that Jesus Christ is always with us.  
We need to know that the love that sent him to Calvary's cross to suffer and die  
so that we might be reconciled to God  
is just as strong and as sacrificial today as it was then.  
Jesus has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He means it!

He is with us here as we gather for worship,  
and he will be with you when you walk through the door back into your world.  
There is nothing in that world of yours that can separate you  
from the love of God in Jesus Christ.  
There is nothing that can come into that world of yours that can separate you  
from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

We need to believe that.  
We need a faith that can hear the promise of Jesus and trust him to keep his promise.  
We need a faith to see Jesus walking on the water, coming to us in our needs,  
and know that it is not wishful thinking but the deepest reality.  
We need to trust Jesus to carry us through every storm that enters our life.

There was once a young boy who was entered in his first mile run.  
At the beginning of the race he kept up with the others,  
but as the race wore on he began to drop back.  
Then suddenly his speed increased, and he passed one runner after another  
until he was near the front of the pack.  
His coach noticed that his lips began moving just before his speed increased,  
so after the race he asked him what he was saying to himself.  
The boy replied, "I just started saying 'You pick 'em up, Lord, and I'll lay 'em down'."

That's what faith is, isn't it?  
It's trusting God to be with you and to help you  
so that you and God can accomplish what needs to be done.  
It's knowing that God is with you in all of life  
and trusting God to be with you to the bitter end...  
and beyond that into the new world Jesus is preparing for us.

To God, whose promises never fail, be praise and honour and glory, now and forever. Amen