

**August 7, 2011**  
**Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**Interim Pastor, Deb Lind-Schmitz**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

<sup>22</sup>Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.<sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,<sup>24</sup> but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.<sup>25</sup> And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.<sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.<sup>27</sup> But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."<sup>28</sup> Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."<sup>29</sup> He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.<sup>30</sup> But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"<sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"<sup>32</sup> When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.<sup>33</sup> And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

**SERMON "Peace Amidst the Storm"**

Impossible Tasks: Alice laughed: "there's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things." (This would be Alice in Wonderland) "I daresay you haven't had much practice," (said) replied the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Impossible tasks, what do you imagine this morning as an impossible task? Walking on water" according to Wikipedia is the quintessential example of an "impossible task accomplished". There are several jokes that may be shared around the world today about this miraculous and impossible feat of "Walking on Water". Some jokes will involve three men in a boat with the punch line- "Jesus knows where the rocks are". Or shorter quips like "we all should have concluded that Peter was going to sink, right? Doesn't Peter mean "the rock". What strikes me as funny (I have a weird sense of humor) is the reality that a Florida scientist claimed he knows how Jesus walked on water. He claims it was really ice. Honestly, he has a theory that there's a cold spring in the sea of Galilee that could have formed ice plates that Jesus walked on. Now I am from Minnesota where balancing on broken ice chunks is as foolish and impossible as finding slimy rocks. "Only a Floridian" would think this would explain the miracle of Christ walking on water. (Mary Kieta's contribution)

There is an old story about devout abbot from a monastery who decided to take a prolonged spiritual retreat in a small cabin located on a remote island in the middle of a large lake. He told his fellow monks that he wanted to spend his days in prayer so as to grow closer to God. For six

months he remained on the island with no other person seeing him or hearing from him in all that time. Then one day, as two monks were standing near the shore soaking up some sunshine, they could see in the distance a figure moving toward them. It was the abbot, walking on water, and coming toward shore. After the abbot passed by the two monks and continued on to the monastery, one of the monks turned to the other and said, "All these months in prayer and the abbot is still as stingy as ever. Why do you say that? Well, he could have spent the 25 cents for a boat ride!" Humor aside, the point of the story is that it's amazing how easily we may sometimes miss the significance of something that is right in front of us. (adapted from a story by Scott Hoezee)

So, what is the significance of this gospel lesson? First of all, There are two stormy boat stories in Matthew (8:23-27 and 14: 33) and they both seem apropos this morning when the hail bounced off my deck and tossed my chair around. In the first storm narration, Jesus is sleeping in the boat while the storm rages and the disciples freak out. He is awakened, calms the storms on the sea and in their hearts and marvels at their anxious doubt. The difference in the Matthew 14:22-33 is Jesus is not with the disciples in the boat, he has gone ahead to pray and they are sailing across the sea to the other side to meet him. In both Matthew 8 and 14, Jesus ends up in the boat with the disciples. But, this morning's gospel, we don't know that. Chapter 14's account emphasizes that the disciples are alone in the boat without help from Jesus.

The similarity is there is a storm which tosses the boat and disciples around. In Matthew 14, the boat is battered by the waves, far from land or help and the wind is against them. There is little hope in this scenario whether you apply this to the church today or the small band of disciples in the first century. The sea is dangerous, threatening and deadly. The overwhelming moment is difficult, uncomfortable and a real reflection of our human condition. Just look at the news, Oslo's tragic loss because of one crazed person's rampage; natural disasters are still taking their toll in every part of the world; the stock market and economy is throwing many into the deep waters of debt. I don't want you to be depressed, so I'll stop.

In the midst of this chaos and fear, Christ comes to us. That is the real miracle for me as I reflect on the church. If we understand that the boat is called the nave and the nave is the church, the hope is Christ can be seen even in the midst of the stormiest times. So, Jesus Christ is seen walking toward the disciples on the raging sea. And, in their terrified state of mind, they think he is a ghost, a figment of their imagination, something to fear. It's a ghost, they cry out. No, no... "Take heart, it is I", He says, "Do not be afraid". Jesus calms their fears and brings them peace. Honestly, Peace amidst the storm seems like the most impossible of tasks when you are experiencing anxiety, fear, confusion and helplessness. Peace could have been enough for the disciples in the boat, but then there is Peter. Peter challenged Jesus using this phrase, (*ei su ei* in the Greek) "If it is you". This same confronting phrase is spoken by Satan in Matthew 4:3, 6, the high priest in Matt 26:63, and the mockers at the cross (27:40). Each put the same identity challenge to Jesus. If it is you, command me to come to you on the water. I understand why Peter

wants to have the same power as Jesus, but it just surprises me that Jesus grants Peter's request. Peter actually, does the impossible. He walks on water until he becomes frightened. Like a child who sits down when she discovers she is walking for the first time. I am never quite satisfied with have more faith and you can walk on water conclusion. Peter is saved by his need for God. . Even in the waters that still raged, even in the midst of the storm, Christ reached out to pull Peter up and out of his sin. Out of his hubris, thinking he could be like God. Grace and Peace was his even as his fear and anxiety threatened to take him under. How? By simply asking for God's help. I am amazed by this moment. When the wind continues to toss the sea, splashing into our eyes, making it impossible to keep our head above water, a buoyant faith is possible. "Save me"

It is after Peter returns to the boat, to the nave, to the other disciples, to the church, that the winds cease. The wind calms down, the boat is calm, and the disciples are out of danger. Moreover, they believe "Truly, Jesus is the Son of God". And, they worship him. "Truly you are the Son of God!"

So what does that say to us, the church? For those who feel like you are "those who are of little faith" Christ is a lifesaver. As one writer put it, "buoyant faith" is possible for the rocks that sink. Maybe the only one who should walk on water is Christ. That wise theology applies to expectations of leaders, ministers and yourself. You may feel like you are being called to do the impossible, to walk on water or just find the stones. You may be like the Queen of Hearts in Alice and Wonderland who claimed that she could tackle impossible tasks with persistence of spirit. On the other hand, you may be more like Alice who is not so sure this is her forte. Either way, the impossible is easier to accomplish when we have a divine helping hand. When we celebrate, "We did it!" it means thanks to you and to God. That's the solid rock on which we stand. So, maybe we do know where the stepping stones are.

As we celebrate communion today, you the church comes with two prayers, a prayer for help and a prayer of faith. God's redeeming, restoring, reconciling grace through Jesus Christ is the impossible made possible. And, This is our belief on which we stand. It is the rock that keeps our head above water. Even in the midst of a spiritual storm. It is good to remember that as we journey through this transition. For the most part, stay in the boat. If you venture out, and feel like you are over your head and drowning, prayerfully ask for help. There is a hand to pull you up. Moreover, calm your fears in the storm, in the transition, on the sea of ministry. Let's celebrate the faith that floats our boat, Let's celebrate Christ , the Son of God who brings us peace in the midst of our storms. Let us celebrate the faith that calls us into this boat with a destination and mission. So, that we may celebrate the impossible made possible, through Christ Jesus. Amen.