

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 14: 22-33

"No Sinking Allowed"

In last week's Holy Gospel and sermon – do you remember the crowd running to catch up with the boat as Jesus was trying to set some alone time?" After feeding all of those people things were building up and the crowd wanted more and more of Jesus and His disciples. Notice the first word of today's Gospel from Matthew – "*immediately*" which gives us a real sense of urgency. Being a child of the 50's and 60's – the first thing that pops into my head is the British Invasion. I remember the Beatles decked out in their fine suits as boys and girls chased them just to touch them and to meet them – even trying to grab a lock of their hair. I remember that like it was "Yesterday." It was such a fevered pitch as the mob pursued their heroes. I can really relate to that image, drawing from my own memories and experience, and I am reminded that in the time of Jesus – the crowd that He fed was in the thousands - five thousand men – and then the women and children. If there was a family of three it had to be more like fifteen thousand – with twelve baskets of leftovers – that is pretty amazing! I am reminded that this was a miracle that people were in awe of – but the best was yet to come. Can you just imagine a crowd that large wanting a piece of you?

We are given some insight into what Jesus must have sensed from that crowd, the rising tide of emotion, since we are told that "*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.*" (Matthew 14:22) The Gospel of Mark gives an account of this event and it even tells us their destination – so we can put together the scene and see where they went from and were going to. "*Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the crowd away.*" (Mark 6:45) Things were starting to build to a crescendo and the people were looking to make Jesus their King. Remember what the leadership of the day was like in Israel? Religious and political leaders literally belonged to the Romans pockets – both Herod and the high priests were paid and out into office by the Romans. John's account of this incident paints a very clear picture of the atmosphere. "*So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.*" (John 6:15) No wonder Jesus sent the disciples away, and no wonder He wanted to have some alone time with the Father, and no wonder He did it immediately!

Let me set the stage for you: they were on the south western side of the Sea of Galilee and were going to head northwest to Bethsaida, which by the way means "*house of fishing.*" In Hebrew – Beth or Bet means "*house of.*" Jesus was born in Bet-lechem (Bethlehem) or the "*house of bread.*" Bethsaida is not far from the village where Peter's mother –in-law lives, Capernaum. So, they were coming from the southwestern part of the lake and heading to the northwestern part. The Sea of Galilee is also known as the Sea of Tiberias or the Sea of Gennesaret. Gennesaret means harp. I do not know how people in ancient times knew that the lake was in the shape of a harp. (We can see from satellite images – and see the shape of the ancient harp.) If you have ever been to the Sea of Galilee you know that there are times when it seems smooth

as glass but in a moments' notice the wind can whip up and it can get pretty wild. As a matter of fact I lost a hat to the Sea of Galilee when we were out on the Jesus Boat.

You know, it was not unusual for the disciples to be out on the lake at night and there are accounts of them fishing all night and catching nothing – Jesus told them to go back out and lower their nets. On this particular night, the wind must have been pretty strong because as today's Holy Gospel says "*when evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.*" (Matthew 14:23-24) Mark's Gospel says "*the boat was in the middle of the sea, and He was alone on the land. Seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them.*" (Mark 6:48) The Gospel of John says that they had only gone "*three or four miles.*" (John 6:19) The important point here is that they were struggling! They had apparently taken down the sails and were using the oars to try to maintain some control of the boat. Jesus sets out toward them. Now remember, Jesus isn't just walking on water – like that is some kind of everyday occurrence – but He had to have walked the three or four miles to catch up with them!

There is a lot going on here! Passages of Scripture are coming to life before them, and us, as to Jesus' true identity and His real power – that these people would connect from Scripture. Like from Job:

- "*Who alone stretches out the heavens and tramples down the waves of the sea?*" (Job 9:8)
- and "*Have you entered into the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?*" (Job 38:16)
- From Isaiah: "*I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.*" Thus says the LORD, Who makes a way through the sea and a path through the mighty waters." (Isaiah 43:15-16)

The Gospels say that Jesus "*came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them. But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; for they all saw Him and were terrified. But immediately He spoke with them and *said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid."*" (Mark 6:48-50) It is important for us to remember that Mark's Gospel is given from Peter's point of view. He was the eyewitness who told John Mark, his friend. Many look at the phrase "*He intended to pass by them*" as an indication that Jesus was heading on without them – but instead we are given some more precious nuggets which further confirm the power, compassion and identity of Jesus as not only the Messiah, but as God Himself. This phrase of "*passing by*" we have heard before: once with Moses and once with Elijah. How remarkable that once again Jesus refers to the "Law" (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) without even saying a word, much like on that mount of Transfiguration – when He was joined by Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the Prophets). Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets and His appearance changed on that mountain – and I want to suggest to you that His appearance changed on that water as well. He may have been glowing and they thought He was a ghost. Listen to God's words to Moses in Exodus 33, when God allows Moses to witness His presence. "*And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be*

gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" Then the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by." (Exodus 33:19-22) Here Jesus – God Incarnate – is passing by His twelve – after they witnessed His compassion in feeding the five thousand and healing many of that multitude.

Elijah went to the mountain waiting for God's voice: *"So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?""* (1Kings 19:11-13) Elijah witnessed the presence of God in the "still small voice." You have heard me say before that in Hebrew the word "wind" is the same word as "spirit" – "Ruach."

Jesus was showing these men, the ones closest to Him – His glory, His power over ALL creation, and once again His compassion for them as He saves them from the storm. But wait! There is still more!!!! The disciples see Jesus, but they think He is a ghost – and become even more terrified. Jesus, having compassion upon them, Jesus cries out to them who He really is. All three Gospels (Mark 6, John 6, and today's Holy Gospel of Matthew 14) are eyewitness accounts and give the same account that Jesus tells these screaming men to take courage and not be afraid – and He says "It is I." The literal meaning is "I am" or in Greek "ego eimi" (ἐγώ εἰμι). It is the same as saying "the I Am is here" or "I, Yahweh, am here" – I want you to consider that. Do you remember we learn God's identity in Exodus 3:14 as the answer to Moses' question about who should he say is sending him? The Lord said "I AM WHO I AM." Then second, the Prophet Isaiah gives us God's words: *"Who has performed and accomplished it, calling forth the generations from the beginning? 'I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last. I am He.'"* (Isaiah 41:4) God also confirms this in Isaiah 43:10, 51:12, and 52:6. You cannot leave breadcrumbs on the water – but He certainly gave them enough clues.

In what was their time of desperate need – "I Am" came to their aid! The Son of God – Jesus of Nazareth got into the boat and they were amazed. After all the things they had witnessed – it is strange that they still were not getting it! The Gospel says *"And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God.""* (Matthew 14:32-33) These Apostles witnessed five thousand or more people being fed with just five loaves and two fish, they were sent out two by two and healed people, they were driving out demons, and they heard every word that Jesus taught – but yet they still were not sure of what they were witnessing. You might say that they were still 'spiritually blind,' not because of sin or rejecting Jesus, but because of their own lack of paying

attention to what God was doing in their midst. Their minds were dull. How many of us have driven in a bad storm or in a heavy fog, as if there were a veil over their eyes. How can anyone who has witnessed, first hand, the feeding of these many thousands, along with Jesus healing people and walking on the water, and His calming the stormy seas, still not know who Jesus was? The answer is simply this – no man can know Jesus unless the Holy Spirit gives him eyes to see Him for who He really is, and ears to hear and digest His Holy Word. How many times have you heard me pray a prayer at the beginning of a sermon asking for God to “*open our eyes, our ears, our hearts and our minds to hear the message You have given us?*” The disciples could not know Jesus as God, until it was revealed to them. They could not understand the meaning of all of the signs and miracles until they could truly know the God that created those miracles.

I want to remind you of a time when Jesus asked two very important questions when they were in a part of the northern part of Israel called Caesarea Philippi. It was the temple of Pan and many other idols. Jesus asked them “*who do people say that I am?*” (Matthew 16:13) “*And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'”* (Matthew 16:14-16) Jesus then tells Peter that it is God the Father who has let him see this truth – and not on his own power. “*And Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Barjona (or son of John), because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 'I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.'* (Matthew 16:17-18) Let me just add to that – Peter is NOT the rock – even though Peter or Petra means rock – but it is the statement that Peter said that is the ‘rock’ upon which the church is built: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”

How much has Jesus been doing in our lives that we have not seen? How many miracles have happened that we didn’t recognize because we were too busy or distracted to see what God was doing? Are we spiritually blind? Can we see God at work in our very midst, or do we count it all as circumstantial? There are no such things as coincidences! Everything happens for a reason. I like to call them “God-incidences.”

Are you fearful of the storms of your life? Do you feel like you are about to go under for the last time? Remember in this Gospel, and I didn’t talk much about it, but Peter said “*Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.*” (Matthew 14:28) So Peter got out of the boat and started walking on water until he realized what he was doing. Then he started to sink because everything was ‘too big for him!’ Jesus grabbed him by the hand and they both got into the boat. Do you feel like Jesus just might pass you by? Please ask God for Him to give to you eyes to see Him as He really is. Ask Him that you would recognize His hand at work in your life.

Do you have a relationship with Jesus? I know people say ‘I am too busy to pray.’ Do you think He far off and you worship and love Him – from a distance? If you need Jesus to calm your storms today – just call on Him. I often tell people, when I have a chance to listen and then share with them that the three most powerful words that I know, and probably one of the most

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powerful prayers that there is - “help me Jesus.” I have told you before that God is a gentleman. He will not force His way into a situation, or into your life, or make you love Him – but call on Him – by saying ‘help me Jesus.’ Stand back and watch the amazing things He will do in your life. Invite Him into your situation. He already sees and knows your need and He’s already coming to you – like He came to the Apostles. Call out to Him and let Him speak peace into your heart and life. Then let the Holy Spirit give you the peace that passes all understanding so that you too can see and know Jesus as He really is. Jesus loves you and He wants to come to you. He not only wants to get into your boat – but will you let Him into your heart?