

Matthew 14:22-33

Why did they say that? Those words the disciples said: Truly, you are the Son of God!—why did they say them? Was it because Jesus had walked on the water? Was it because after climbing into the boat, the storm stopped? Probably so. That was some pretty amazing stuff. But if we form our picture of God because of the miracles He does, we're no better off than those who believe in false gods.

Every false religion paints a powerful picture of their god. It's all about might and strength. "My god can beat up your god," one pagan says to another. And we Christians sit back and laugh, because the things Jesus does puts all the legends of their false gods to shame. But that's not why we are blessed. It's not because our God is almighty. It's not because our God can walk on water and still storms. We Christians are blessed because our God, Jesus Christ, allowed the storm of His Father's anger to do its worst to Him. Jesus truly is the Son of God not just because He walked on the water toward His disciples, but because He walked with bruised and bleeding feet toward the cross. Jesus is, of a truth, God's Son not because the storm was stilled as He climbed up into the wooden boat, but because He stilled the storm of God's judgment against you by allowing Himself to be raised up on a wooden cross.

And this God comes to you—where you are at—with all the troubles in your life, just as He came to His troubled disciples on the stormy sea. He comes not to amaze you with His might so that you sing: What an awesome God we have!—but to meet you in the water, and quietly but surely forgive your sins; those sins which are at the root of all your troubles. He comes with His merciful hand to lift you up out of death and give you life.

You probably realize by now, how closely we resemble those disciples. Here they are—it's 4:00 in the morning, and they're struggling against a stormy sea in their little boat. And where was their God? Way up high—on a mountain, with eyes closed in prayer. Yes, Jesus came through when they were hungry—feeding five thousand with a few pieces of fish and bread. But now when things are desperate, He's nowhere to be found.

That's what we think, too. Where is God when I really need Him? My marriage is a mess. My finances are a wreck. My friends have turned against me. My life is a real struggle—and where is God? Oh, it's nice that's He's up there praying for me. But I need His help right here and now!

But it was no ghost the disciples saw—it was Jesus coming to them on the water. Our trouble is that we have the same doubts as those disciples. Jesus comes to us in the water of Holy Baptism. He comes with real help for our real troubles; real forgiveness; real life—but we, too, have difficulty seeing and believing that it really is Him.

We have difficulty believing that because we're baptized, we are and remain God's forgiven children no matter how many, and how great our wrongdoings—and that He empowers us to forgive our spouse. We have difficulty believing that because we're baptized, God is not angry at us...ever! We're tempted to see baptism not as Jesus giving us every good gift that He has to give, but as some great work we do for God.

And it doesn't help when other churches out there tell us, "it's not really Jesus in baptism... it's only a ghost...it's only water." Just last week a pastor from a different church body wrote me a letter. "We're happy," he wrote, "that one of your members made a decision to receive Jesus with us during our Vacation Bible School." It matters not to this pastor that Jesus already received this member in Holy Baptism! Because he denies that Jesus is in the water. "It's only a ghost," he says.

But Jesus is in the water! It was Him coming to His disciples in the water. And it is Him who comes to us in the water at the font. And coming to us in the water He reaches out His hand and lifts us up out of our death and gives us His life. And He brings us into the boat of His Church with Him. And He stays with us to forgive us daily of our sins; to be our constant Help and Deliverer; to lead us to the shores of heaven.

Peter was in the water with Jesus. And he began to sink beneath the waves. He did what you and I do every day—he took his eyes off Jesus. He worried about the storm around him. We do that. We take our eyes off Christ. We think that a glance, now and then, is good enough. But the storms are always around us. Your troubles will never leave you alone. And they will pull you down into the depths—and like Peter, you and I are helpless to prevent it.

But Jesus is in the water with you. As He reached out His hand to Peter, so in Holy Baptism He joins Himself to you—and He will not let you fall. The storm of God's judgment cannot hurt you, for Jesus was swallowed up by that storm on the cross for you. To fix your eyes on Jesus means to go to, and remember, your baptism daily—remember who you are: a forgiven child of God for Jesus' sake; remember that your God will never leave you nor forsake you. His arm is stronger than all your troubles.

A mother in Florida watched her son swimming in a lake near their home. She became horrified to see an alligator, unseen by her son, heading in his direction. She ran from the house down to the lake, screaming to her son to get out of the water. He swam for shore, but just as he reached it the gator snatched his leg in its mouth. The mother grabbed her son's arm and pulled as hard as she possibly could. Both were pulling at the same time—the alligator on his leg, and the mother on his arm. Finally, the gator let go. Later, at a hospital, a friend came to see the wounded boy. "Can I see your leg," he asked. Pulling back the sheet he saw the marks that the alligator's teeth had left. But then the boy said, "You need to see my arm." Pulling back his sleeve he showed his friend horrible and painful bruises on his arm. "These marks were made by my mom," he said, "because she refused to let go."

Jesus would not let go of Peter, and He will not let go of you. And sometimes His marks are painful. But they are for your good because He loves you. A Nebraska farmer once told me that his little girl had died of cancer years earlier. "I'm not sure why God took her," he said, "except that I know He wanted her with Him in heaven." "Yes," I said, "but God also wants you in heaven." You see, before his daughter died, this man had not been very faithful in coming to God's House to hear the preached Word and receive the Sacrament. But since her death, he has been a faithful church member because he wants to see his little girl again.

God's hands hurt this man terribly. But it was out of love to keep him from falling. And friend, God loves you in the same way. He may squeeze you hard. He may send His pastor to rebuke you with the Law. He may allow a sickness to come to you. He may allow a trouble to come, or even a death in the family. But, you see, Jesus will not let you go. He claimed you for His own in Baptism. He loves you with an everlasting love. He laid down His life for you. And in the waters of Baptism He keeps holding you with His strong hand. He will not allow you to be devoured by that fierce alligator, Satan. For Jesus truly is God. And this you know, not just because He can defeat sin, death and Satan—but because He did—for you, and in the waters He gives all this to you. Amen.