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Propers 14 (Pentecost 10) Series A 2017

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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 13, 2017 (Proper 14)

Ok, so Jesus is God. We confess that every week in the creed when we recite “and in one Lord, Jesus Christ,” or in even stronger language when we come to that phrase in the Nicene Creed “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made...” We have the confession down and in our congregations and among most members of the conservative end of Christianity in North America, we are fairly unanimous in this. On the left fringe, including some within our own Synod and even more within the ELCA, we find those who doubt the divinity of Christ. Most of them, however, don’t merely doubt that Jesus is God, they usually doubt the whole existence of God. The deity of Christ has been well established among Christians since the beginning. If you want to read a great book on that, I continue to recommend Larry Hurtado’s “Lord Jesus Christ.” The disputes of the fourth century were often not so much about the divinity of Christ but how we would describe that in human words. Almost everyone at the table believed Jesus was God.

Today the intellectuals who struggle with this confession of Jesus as LORD, and that is a significant struggle for some, seem to be self-defeating, and this is itself an argument against what they are doing. The dynamism and missionary zeal which is derived from the faith in Christ, the Son of God, cannot be matched by the cold intellectual assent of the Unitarians or the Jesus Seminar. Jesus the moral teacher who had some really good ideas about how to live life just doesn’t compare to Jesus the Son of God who gives you eternal life at the cost of his blood on the cross. The followers of great moral teachers are not moved with the same passion to build cathedrals and found hospitals and massive aid societies nor risk life itself ministering to the victims of some contagious plague. I don’t know if you have noticed, but most of the westerners being infected by Ebola in western Africa in the recent outbreak there were Christian missionary medical types. It is the doctors and nurses of the Samaritan’s Purse organization who risked their lives to contain this plague for the rest of us. Even more telling is that the folks who cannot buy into the divinity of Jesus find that they have nothing to pass along to their children. The children of those who have accommodated their faith to the prevailing modernism are staying away from Church in droves.

But before we congratulate ourselves for the rectitude of our faith, we have to face that fact that the peculiar message of Christ’s divinity may in fact not be so commonly understood or held as we like to imagine. I am not saying that any of us or our parishioners have denied it, but I sometimes wonder if we have thought or believed through the implications of the eternal God, infinite and holy, being found in the confines of a manger or dying as a common criminal on a cross. I don’t know whether it is that we have a small picture of God and imagine that showing up on earth might just be an acceptable option for such a deity or if it is something else. For whatever reason, we don’t often find ourselves standing in awe of what God has done in the incarnation. We confess it, yawn, and get worked up about the budget numbers at the last council meeting. I sometimes feel like we are a group of ninnies who have camped on a rumbling

volcano and are dickering about who gets to sleep by the window. We are in the presence of God on Sunday morning but we find ourselves blasé enough about that fact to criticize the organist or worse, just skip it altogether.

Another way to imagine this problem is to focus on the scandal of particularity, the idea that Jesus is **the** God, and the only God. This is also a problem for those who have bought into the current culture. In some corners, there is another segment of the society which is happy to accord to Jesus divinity, but then they turn around and apply the same appellation to any number of others, finding “god” in all sorts of people, forces, places, and the like. Their struggle is in the particular claim to divinity which Jesus and Christianity makes.

One of our regular interlocutors, now retired, Armenio, working in a Latino cultures, says that he sees the people of his community raising up the Virgin to the level of Christ/divinity and often place much more of their trust in her than they do in Christ. Thus the claim to the divinity of Christ is accepted but their trust does not end up there. This would suggest a first commandment issue. They trust someone other than God.

But perhaps we are just so busy with our lives that we don’t really have the time to think about, ponder this mystery. Are we so wrapped up in our gadgets and economies and families that we don’t have time to let this “Jesus is God” message affect us? Do we need to stop and be quiet for a while? Is this perhaps a third commandment “honor the Sabbath...” sort of an issue and the problem we see here is not a failure to confess the divinity of Christ but a failure to worship or honor this relationship that way.

What if we really believed what we confessed and acted that way? Jesus has come in the flesh. The eternal, omnipotent, omniscient God has come into this world, taken up humanity to himself, dwelt among us and redeemed us. This God now makes himself present in our gatherings, not in power and glory, but in mercy and gentle kindness, so we are not fried to a crisp. When I extend my hand at that rail, I am given his body and his blood to drink. When we splash that water on another child’s head, God himself is acting and touching and redeeming another lost sinner. When we absolve a sinner or a whole congregation’s worth, those words ring in heaven and God himself says “Amen.” When we read the Scriptures, the Master teacher is teaching us. When we sing those songs, angels are singing with us.

Can we really yawn in the midst of that? If we do, who has the problem?

Or is this really a first commandment issue for us all. Do we take our problems to something else and hence the deity of Christ is simply not that exciting for us. It doesn’t solve our problems, which often are a perception of boredom.

Collect

Almighty and merciful God, preserve us from all harm and danger that we, being ready in both body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish what You want done; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Almighty and merciful – those two seemingly opposite characteristics are what gives Christianity much of its energy. Some, looking at all the problems in the world, doubt the might of God. He cannot solve the problems or he would. Others, admit his strength, but call him a wicked God, a God who delights in suffering and pain. Both of them have erred on the opposite side of the same problem. The tension created by God’s power and mercy is essential to the Christian message and the Christian preaching. If we would lose one or the other, preaching loses its power. It is uncomfortable, but necessary. The preacher should delight in the tension because of what it does, yet cannot lose sight of that fact that any tension like this, be it Law/Gospel, Sinner/Saint, or something else, that tension is always uncomfortable for the preacher and the hearer or it is not tension.

We beseech God to preserve us from all harm and danger so that we could be ready in body and soul to do cheerfully what he wants done. This is a prayer with a couple of important assumptions behind it. First of all, it assumes that God wants something done and actually wants us to do it. Of course, being almighty, that is not sensible. The Almighty does not need things to be done, he simply does them. But the merciful God, the God of gracious care for his people, that God opens his arms and makes rooms for us to be part of his almighty Kingdom. So we have the oxymoronic situation in which an almighty God comes to us and asks us for “help.”

The second assumption here is that we can either want to do them and can do them. Luther says in his explanation to the Third Article in the Large Catechism that God accomplishes all his work through this community of believers he has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified. This too requires a careful balance of power and mercy. As rebellious creatures we are not inclined to do the things that God wants and even if we can be so inclined our ability to do them is critically impaired. Think of a broken down car. If it was capable of a will and wanted to drive on the freeway again, it needs some serious remedial work before it can achieve highway speeds. Likewise the human being, even if the will were fully restored to us would find the doing of the of the divinely ordered deed impossible in the same way that the Chevy with a cracked block is not going to hit highway speeds, at least not for long.

It is here that the might and mercy of God come together. The preservation from all harm and danger which we prayed for earlier is not just a passive keeping an eye out for us in case the bad guy shows up, but it is the marshalling of God’s omnipotent power by his mercy to reshape, mold, and change us so that we might want to do what he wants done and then actually be able to do it. The greatest evil which hinders our doing good is not external to ourselves, but it is our own broken nature. Conversely said, I don’t know that we can look at all the great things that Christians have done over the last two thousand years and not see the handiwork of God in that. Humanity is of itself rather brutish. We dominate and destroy rather well. We don’t selflessly build and give very well. Praise God for the hospitals and universities, for the social welfare agencies and the fact that most people can read. God has indeed used his power mercifully to work his work in humanity. Give thanks for that.

More importantly, the ranks of those who call on the name of Jesus, the folks who pray and praise and forgive and love with Jesus love continues to grow every day.

The preacher will need then to keep this in mind because might and mercy when combined will work this: We cheerfully do things we believe in and have bought into fully. The person who is thus internally motivated is powerfully motivated, indeed preternaturally motivated. The duty has been taken right out of it and the power of the person God created and redeemed is unleashed. But the root of all this is really relational. When we do something out of love and when we do something we enjoy it never seems like a burden or an imposition or some duty, even though another who is doing the same thing might consider it all those things. For the person who is cheerfully and joyfully serving that way, he/she sees value in what is done for its own sake. We have helped someone, we have been able to make something better, we can see the result and the joy we give, the help we render, the life we save is itself the pleasure of the deed.

Readings

Job 38:4-18 I have included the verses from the beginning of the chapter which introduce our pericope. The section which follows is a variation on the theme we have here, but is also worth reading.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:

² *“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?*

³ *Dress for action like a man;*

I will question you, and you make it known to me.

⁴ *“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ *Who determined its measurements—surely you know!*

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ *On what were its bases sunk,*

or who laid its cornerstone,

⁷ *when the morning stars sang together*

and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

⁸ *“Or who shut in the sea with doors*

when it burst out from the womb,

⁹ *when I made clouds its garment*

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

¹⁰ *and prescribed limits for it*

and set bars and doors,

¹¹ *and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,*

and here shall your proud waves be stayed’?

- ¹² “Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,
¹³ that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?
¹⁴ It is changed like clay under the seal,
and its features stand out like a garment.
¹⁵ From the wicked their light is withheld,
and their uplifted arm is broken.
- ¹⁶ “Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
¹⁷ Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
¹⁸ Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.

We are probably familiar with the story of Job, but don't be too sure that your folks are. If they are familiar with Job, chances are they not familiar with the real message of Job. For most Christians it is a story about a guy who lost it all and then got it back again because he did not curse God. This much is true or at least half true. But we are such a prose generation and hold an aversion to poetry that we usually and simply jump over the vast middle section of Job from which our reading is taken today. We cherry pick out the “I know that my redeemer lives” line for our favorite Easter hymn, but that is about the extent of it.

Those who study scripture and ancient cultures think that the book of Job is actually two different works which were created at entirely different times. The narrative section, the story with which we are most familiar, only occupies about three chapters of Job. It is a story which is told in many ancient cultures, just as the golden rule is common to most cultures. The person who suffers through hardship, remaining faithful to God, eventually sees his faith and perseverance rewarded by God. It is fundamentally a moralizing story which was designed to reinforce what the ancients saw as a virtue, in this case persistent service to God in the face of difficulty. This story is ancient, probably one of the oldest parts of the Bible. We don't know where it comes from, it seems to predate the foundation of the nation of Israel, because no mention is made of Abraham or any of the elements of the covenant.

In the reconstruction to which most commentators subscribe, sometime around the time of Solomon or as late as the Exile, the Israelite theologians/thinkers picked up the story and noticed something they thought was odd within it. In this ancient story of Job it appeared that God and Satan had made something of a wager or a bet and that poor Job served as the horse they were betting on. These thinkers of a later time read the story and said, “That wasn't very nice of God to do to poor old Job!” They wondered what this says about God. They wondered what it said about the reason people suffer. And so they composed this middle section of the book, the much

longer section which starts in chapter three and goes on for another 39 chapters. They inserted this into the story right where their question was asked. They are wondering why bad things happen to good people. Why do some folks live their life right and still get dumped upon? Is it the case, as the story of Job asserts, that God is playing games with us, wagering some galactic sum with other beings and we are nothing more than helpless pawns in the whole affair?

Written in rather dense poetry, it recounts Job's three friends who come to comfort him. But with friends like this, no one needs an enemy. Their discussion turns into a discussion of why this has happened to job. The three friends basically have one answer. Job must have done something to deserve this. There must be some form of universal justice. If terrible things happen to people it has to have a reason.

Job, on the other hand, insists that he has not done anything to deserve all this. Now, this sounds rather arrogant to us but it did not to the people of that time and it should not to us either. Job is simply stating, not that he has been perfect, but that he has repented of his sins and brought them to God as he was supposed to do. The friends are asserting that Job has some un-repenting sin in his past and this is why he is suffering so. Job says that if this is the reason, this is fundamentally unfair. He has gone to church and spoken the confession and meant it. Why are all these terrible things happening to him?

Job eventually says that he has a legitimate beef with God. At this point God shows up and this is where our text for today is located. The final chapters of the middle section of Job have God challenging Job to stand up and ask his questions and level his charges against God. God is asking if Job was there when he made the world and has he defined its limits. Of course Job was not there, he realizes his mistake and bows in humility before God.

The answer which the book of Job offers us to the question of why people suffer is mostly unsatisfying to people who raise it as an accusation against God today. Why do bad things happen to good people? Job says that we really don't have a right to ask the question. God is God and he is so much bigger than you are. You really don't have a leg to stand on in all this. Our only realistic position is to lie face down in the dust and hope he doesn't zap us. You can imagine that this does not sit well with the humanist crowd today. My students don't usually like it very much either.

It is a reading which focuses our attention the almighty part of that prayer. But it also has the mercy. Job doesn't get zapped. In fact, all this thunder and lightning seems to be intent on teaching Job a lesson, a lesson he really needs to hear. God does not want to destroy his servant but to set him straight, and so he goes to some trouble to wake up this stubborn and angry man. The end of the story is still the same. He gets it all back and more, but now as a much humbler Job who realizes that all the riches and the family and the things of this life are gifts from God.

So what does all this mean for us today? Have we, if we insist that Jesus is only a god and not the God, actually created a very different sort of god than the one who is revealed to Job? Is the

scandal of particularity really problematic for folks because it suggests a God which is out of our control, a God who does things which I don't understand?

Remember that Job will not satisfy the unregenerate – that God is God and we need to let him be that, is hardly an answer to their formulation of the problem of evil. This text will not answer the person who comes from that position. It will, however make sense and really bolster the faith of the person who already believes. The person who is hurting and questioning God needs our love, not argument. We need, as Peter said, to be ready to give a reason for our hope, but giving a reason for our hope and argument are two different things. I don't need to defend God.

This text, however, enjoins us to proclaim a God of great power, danger, and glory to the people whom God leads to us. This will be essential for the proclamation of the Gospel today. The Jesus who crawls over the gunwale of that fishing boat is this God who stretched out the line and measured the earth like we might measure a piece of plywood when we built a dog house.

Psalm 18:1-6 (7-16)

I love you, O LORD, my strength.

²The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

³I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
and I am saved from my enemies.

⁴The cords of death encompassed me;
the torrents of destruction assailed me;

⁵the cords of Sheol entangled me;
the snares of death confronted me.

⁶In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I cried for help.

From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.

⁷Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.

⁸Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.

⁹He bowed the heavens and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.

¹⁰He rode on a cherub and flew;
he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.

- ¹¹ He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,
thick clouds dark with water.
- ¹² Out of the brightness before him
hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.
- ¹³ The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.
- ¹⁴ And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.
- ¹⁵ Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.
- ¹⁶ He sent from on high, he took me;
he drew me out of many waters.
- ¹⁷ *He rescued me from my strong enemy
and from those who hated me,
for they were too mighty for me.*
- ¹⁸ *They confronted me in the day of my calamity,
but the LORD was my support.*
- ¹⁹ *He brought me out into a broad place;
he rescued me, because he delighted in me.*
- ²⁰ *The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness;
according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.*
- ²¹ *For I have kept the ways of the LORD,
and have not wickedly departed from my God.*
- ²² *For all his rules were before me,
and his statutes I did not put away from me.*
- ²³ *I was blameless before him,
and I kept myself from my guilt.*
- ²⁴ *So the LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness,
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.*

We get this psalm because it seems to resonate with the text of Job which we consider. It too speaks of the almighty God who has measured the heavens and created the earth. And like Job, the psalmist is appealing to the mighty one for help. The Psalm has an interesting back story. It is also found as the bulk of II Samuel 22 in which it is attributed to David as a song he sang after God delivered him from his enemies, especially Saul.

The editors of the pericope may have just been looking for something of appropriate length, but I wonder if they did not chop this one too soon. I have included the whole psalm for us. The final verses really sound much like Job's claim in the book which bears his name. He has been righteous and God deals with him accordingly. That sounds so alien to us, but is that not a failure of our faith. God does see us as righteous and deals with us accordingly. It is true that we are righteous in Christ. Are we so afraid to utter those words that we have truncated the psalm? I am fully cognizant that we need to be careful with this material because our human nature will frequently twist it to mean that we have somehow earned something from God. But the better way to read the final paragraph here is to understand that the righteousness of the psalmist is imputed, the righteousness of Jesus given.

If we are unwilling to own that righteousness, if we are so penitential that we cannot be celebratory about God's gift to poor, miserable sinners, is that not eventually a denial of faith itself?

Romans 10:5-17 *Here too I have given us a few verses which precede the reading.*

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ² For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

⁵ For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" ¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

We struggle with this passage and it has to do with the collect of the day. There we are to accomplish the things God's wants. He has declared us righteous in Christ so that we may declare the righteousness of God, yes by pointing to the righteousness he has worked in us, the forgiveness of our sins, but also by declaring that right-ness to others.

Paul is exploring his letter's primary argument which is the transformative power of God's great work in Christ. He has chosen to use as an illustration the great issue which has consumed his ministry: That might just give us a moment to pause. Do we really preach about the painful and difficult issues which face our congregations? I think sometimes we take the easy way out, preaching the good justification sermon but never mention the strife or conflict which rends our fellowship, because it is just too painful. We don't deal with the intractable problems of our society like poverty, greed, or the like. But real preaching takes these things head on, like Paul does here. Real preaching moves right to the pain and the real problems which people face. It is not comfortable for the preacher or the audience all the time. It comforts us in our discomfort, but it doesn't avoid the discomfort.

Paul takes up the thorny and intractable problem of the relationship between Jew and Gentile. We don't know if this was a serious problem in Rome or not. I read a very long and tedious book on the subject and came to the conclusion with the author that we don't know.

For Paul the unifying feature of the Christian and the Jew is not a covenantal obedience which stems from an economic relationship but the faith of Christ (see the Greek at 1:16-17, 3:21-27, and 4:16; also Galatians 3:22 for the construction "faith of Jesus") which now is found in the believer and which cheerfully obeys the law of God or as Paul says it here the law or rule of the Gospel. This is the real righteousness which the old covenant and its rules could not really deliver to people and which God has delivered to us graciously in Christ.

For us, this is most interesting because Paul describes the process of acquiring faith and a little of how it works. He says that faith does not strive to go to heaven, (ascend) nor does it somehow bring Christ up from the dead, (undoing the crucifixion?) but it simply recognizes what is already there, the Word that dwells within us. The more I read this whole book and come back to it again and again, the more I am convinced that we have consistently mistranslated the passages I cite in the prior paragraph. If you look in your English translations they are almost always translated as "faith in Jesus" as if the genitive is an objective genitive, that is: We believe in Jesus. But that is grammatically unlikely and inconsistent. I think Paul is telling us that the Spirit of God allows us to call God "Father" because in taking up human nature God has given to us the faith which Jesus had. That faith, that alien-to-us relationship which Jesus had with the Father is what saves us. He has given us his relationship with the Father and we are saved. Thus faith is not something you do, but something which God has given to you.

This faith does not fit into the boxes we like to make for it, even in the way we acquire it. Faith comes by hearing, notice, not by reading. I am all for reading the Bible, but there something about hearing it from another and believing what they said that is almost essential to faith. I

cannot deny that someone could come to faith simply from reading their Bible, but I think that number is very small. It is much more potent when someone looks you in the eye and says, “I believe...”

This relationship which we call faith and which we share with Christ, unites us and breaks down every barrier. There is no distinction, not even a distinction between those who have faith and do not have faith. They are all the same in one sense, helpless. What makes the difference is in fact up to God, not up to us. Not only have all fallen short of the glory of God now everyone who “faiths” with their heart and confesses with their mouth is saved. Justified by the faithful believing and saved through the confession, God is no longer making the old distinctions we thought once were so important. God is embarrassing us with his mercy.

So, the message needs to be preached, because the Word proclaimed does things to people. People who have encountered the Word proclaimed can “faith” what is preached. If you don’t hear the promise you cannot believe the promise. Not everyone who hears does believe. Remember the parable of the sower a couple of weeks ago? But there also is some good soil out there. Faith does come through hearing this promise proclaimed, the promise of Christ and what he has done.

Are you sensing a tension here? We believe with the faith of Christ. I am not sure how exactly to explain that. Is it my faith or Jesus’s faith? The answer is “Yes”. Don’t run away from that tension but revel in it. Do not try to resolve the tension, but let it be the engine of real dynamism within your people.

Paul speaks of hearing and listening. How often don’t we tell God what to say, in effect obscuring or overpowering the Word proclaimed with our own voice? It distorts the word and turns it into a Jesus who looks like and approves of people like us, but who never challenges us. Is the silence of the believers really a silent acquiescence to what the mishearers are saying? Do we mishear and does that silence us in the face of the misbelief of our neighbors and others? (See the essay at the beginning of these notes.)

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

²⁸ And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.”

³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

³⁴ And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. ³⁵ And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick ³⁶ and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

The Gospel and the OT lesson are chosen to go with one another. What is the connection here? Does Peter look like Job? Does he look like Job in his failure to look at God? Does he look for proof when he should have just listened to Jesus’ words of comfort? Does he resemble Job in getting in over his head, literally over his head in the deep waters of the Sea of Galilee? Do we also get called out of the safety of our boats and find ourselves doing something we don’t think we can do it? Do we find ourselves, like Peter, standing before multitudes of people with only a few loaves and fish in our basket but Jesus has us feed them all. Is this story really reminding us that Peter and the rest of the disciples, despite sometimes getting it really right, like when they feed the multitudes, sometimes also get it really wrong? Is it pointing us toward the steadfast and consistent God by contrasting him with the flighty disciples?

Is the real connection with the Job text really in verse 31? When Peter sinks does he look like Job in his foolish questioning of God? Does Peter get the same gracious help of God, even when his faith is weak and poor? Jesus doesn’t leave Job in an ash heap, and he doesn’t leave Peter to sink beneath the waves, the results which both men really deserved, but which God remedied.

Or is the Job connection in verse 33, when the disciples, who had been so afraid of the wind and waves outside the boat, and the apparition who appeared to them, suddenly find the wind and waves calmed and they are truly afraid of the one who is now in the boat with them? Is that the connection? Do the disciples do the only sensible thing and worship him, acclaiming him to be the Son of God, just like Job does the only sensible thing he could have done when God charged him to answer the questions of our OT text? He repents and submits to God.

Job has destroyed our intellectual arrogance and demanded that we humble stand before God and admit that we are powerless and ignorant. God has destroyed our human ability in which we love to trust. We cannot trust what we know, what power we have, or anything else of our own devising. We are weak and helpless. But Jesus reaching out his hand to Peter calls for us to trust him. By his cross he has displaced all the things which vie for our trust, including ourselves. He has occupied that spot in our lives – in him we trust. Should put that on our money, I think.

So what is our sermon?

- 1. Jesus saved Peter – drew him up from the water that would have killed him. Because he loved Peter, despite all his foolishness.*

2. *Get out of the boat! Are we so averse to getting wet that we refuse to leave the comfortable confines of our Church? They imagine that old people like us have brittle bones, we should not be crawling over the edge of the boat. We might get hurt that way. This is work for large and young congregations, not us. But Peter may have failed, but Jesus lifted him up and brought him back to a safe place made safer because He was there.*
3. *Do we sometimes feel like we are pulling hard against the wind and making no progress? Does Jesus come to us, offer us unorthodox commands, and get into our boats, so that the waves might be stilled and the winds with them.*
4. *Whatever you do, keep those eyes glued to Jesus! How did Peter see the wind anyway? Waves I understand. Hearing wind, I get that. But he saw the wind.*
5. *The God of the Gaps is not really what we trust. Our scientific and materialistic world has largely displaced God from our lives. We know God doesn't send the rain; that is something the meteorologists have figured out. This had led to our arrogance and the assumption that we don't need God except for little gaps in our knowledge and lives. Jesus and Job demand that we trust the God of the whole picture, the whole universe. We think we have it figured out, but in truth, good scientists will tell you that we have very little figured out. In fact, many quantum physicists are quite religious.*
6. *Trust – Job and Matthew demand that we trust. Job leaves us intellectually humbled and we have to trust something. Science, for some folks, is another thing in which might trust. But so is Jesus. The question becomes which voice are we listening to? Back to that first commandment question. Our God is the thing or person who will solve our deepest problems and answer our deepest questions. Jesus calls us to trust, he extends his hand to Peter and pulls him up from the deep.*

Following upon the story of the feeding of the Five Thousand, Matthew gives us this episode in the ministry of Jesus. Mark does exactly the same thing, but much earlier in his narrative. This happens already in chapter five and six of Mark. A comparison will also reveal some interesting differences between the stories. Matthew develops the Peter story which is completely absent from the Marcan account. Mark also ends his story with the disciples completely befuddled and wondering who this Jesus is. Matthew has them worshipping him and calling him God. Mark has Jesus intending to “pass by” the disciples in the boat. Matthew seems to suggest that Jesus is walking out toward them and for that purpose.

Matthew wants his audience to join the disciples in their assertion about Jesus and any good preacher should probably join him in that. “Truly you are the Son of God.” This is a pretty good thing for the sinner to confess about Jesus, just remember Paul's words in the Epistle lesson where he says that the one who believes and confesses is saved.

The Peter story is another interesting feature of this account. Peter is bold to get out of the boat, but loses sight of Jesus and begins to sink. Only Jesus saves him then but questions him. Why did he doubt? Indeed, he was already walking on the water. How much more proof does one need? But proof is not perhaps what we are lacking. Perhaps Jesus hits the nail on the head here. It is not a proof deficit, but a faith deficit. Just what does it mean to doubt? What does it mean to “faith.” (English suffers from a strange lack of a verbal form of faith. Believe is from another root and has a different connotation. E. P. Sanders and Luke T. Johnson suggested that we start using faith as a verb “faithing” but it seems clumsy to many.)

The upshot of this whole story seems to me to be the confession of the disciples at the end. Jesus tips his hand here. He is God. The laws of nature don’t seem to apply to him, or perhaps the forces of nature listen to him is a better way to say it. He can walk on the water, command the wind and waves, and even have another person walk on the water. This is not the work of just any man or some moralizing teacher. This is the work of the Lord of Nature, the Creator; it is the work of God. The disciples recognize that here. They bow down and worship. It is all one can do when in the presence of God.

C. S. Lewis argues in Mere Christianity that the liberal types have glossed this claim. When one reads the NT one has to wrestle with this claim that Jesus is God. As Lewis said, you cannot simply call Jesus a good man who said good things. He is either the Son of God, a liar, or a madman on the level of the fellow who believes he is an egg. Or, as Lewis asserts, he is something much worse, demonic. But clearly the “nice moral teacher” option is right out.

What will we do in the presence of God today? Will we hedge our bets? Will we cower under the pews? Will we jump up and shout, “Hallelujah?” Will we check our watch when the sermon gets over 12 minutes or roll our eyes when we realize the closing hymn has six verses and he means to sing them all. Will we look out the window and wonder if all the cars we see streaming by are going to the same restaurant we want to patronize on the way home, forcing me to wait another 15 minutes? Will we think about the game of golf we could have had on this beautiful Sunday morning? God is here today. What will we do? What should we do? What is the appropriate response to the presence of God in this place?

Are we really ready to ask such a question? It might mean something very different than what we expect or even want.

Law

1. God is here today. He is the omnipotent Creator who has every right to make demands upon our life and expect us to keep them. We have no complaint that holds water nor do we have a right to gripe about this situation. He made us and he is perfectly within his rights to ask something of us and to destroy us if we don’t measure up to the standard that he sets.

2. He can make it possible for us to walk on the water. Do we have the faith to get out of the boat? Are our eyes even open enough to see him, fear him, and ask for the command?
3. God's mercy means that he has hidden his glory from us, permitting us the delusion that he is not here, does not care, or perhaps does not exist. Our sinful minds leap at the opportunity and frequently distract us from the presence of God in our lives.
4. Our inability and stubborn unwillingness to see God in all this means that when he does pull back the curtain a little bit and we see even a glimpse of him, we are apt to be terrified and paralyzed by that terror. And since terror is a wholly irrational emotion, we often do stupid things in that situation or completely misread what is a gracious event as a moment of judgment.
5. Our eyes have a very difficult time staying focused on Christ. Our hearts cannot dwell on him without distraction and temptation. I wish I were different, but I am not different. I cannot change who I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?
6. What do we expect when we come to meet God on Sunday mornings? Do we really think we will see fireworks? A miracle? Rays of light shooting from the altar? What will the presence of God look like? What if he comes and calls us out of the comfort and safety of our boats? What if he sends us out to a hungry world and says "feed them." or what if he points us to a strange neighbor who does not know the Lord and says, "love them."? What if that neighbor hates the Lord or more likely hates the people who call themselves Christian? What if that neighbor hates me?

Gospel

1. God is here today. But he is not here to judge our sin. That happened long ago in the cross and the suffering of Christ is punishment enough. He not here to whip us into shape. He is simply here because he wants to be here with you. He loves you. He delights in you and cares for you.
2. He has hidden his power and majesty from our eyes, not because he does not want us to see them, but because he knows our weakness. In our fallen state, if we encounter the power of God, we will have eyes only for that power. But it is the mercy we desperately need and the love which sustains us today. So he comes in simple and humble things and people. Faith comes by hearing the halting words spoken by a flawed fellow human being. No angel will speak God's word to us today, he does it through a person.
3. God's loving presence in Christ conquers our fear. He calls us out of the boat, enabling faith to change who we are and what we are willing to do. If he calls us, we can get out of the boat! And should we fall, he extends his hand to us and raises us up. At his word the storms cease for us. All things are subjected to his will and his will is for us and for our salvation.

4. Like Peter we often have taken our eyes off the author and perfecter of our faith. To do so is fundamentally faithlessness, for to look at him is to believe. But even when our faith has failed, he has never forgotten the promises he made in our baptism. For the whole of our life he has reached out his hand and pulled us up and set us safe and dry in the boat.
5. Christ steers our boat as well, steers it toward the mission and goals that he sets for us. The disciples ended up in Gennesaret, a Gentile place, a place where good Jewish boys did not hang out. There they found a people receptive to the Christ, flocking to him. Matthew's audience and we as well can be quite comfortable in our boats and where we think they are heading, but Jesus has bigger plans than we know. We are not afraid of that, because the hand at the tiller has a hold in it where he died for us. That hand has plucked us from the wave. That hand holds our hand. Remember, he likes to be with us.

Sermon Themes:

1. Step out of the Boat in Faith: (Gospel and Epistle lessons – That the Spirit of God would remove the hearer's fears and get them out of the safety of their "boat" to engage in risky and fruitful ministry.)

This is a favorite "take" on this passage. I am not sure we don't read too much into it sometimes, but it can be very helpful and I think faithful to the text as well. The basic premise is that we are often are afraid to get out of the safety of our little world. We are very good at noticing the negatives, the reasons we cannot dare set foot out there. We are old, we are small, we don't have very much money, etc. It is cozy in our little boat. Most churches are built in a way which resembles a boat. That is why they are called a "nave" which is the Latin word for boat and from which the English word navy is derived. That will be the law development. We are comfortable, but trapped inside the walls of our comfort. It is safe but Jesus is out there, and he calls us out of the boat into the stormy world and we might even get to walk on the water.

If we play it safe, stay in the boat, and never venture forth we will miss what he has in mind for us. That is not to say that the rest of the disciples who cowered behind the gunwales of their little fishing boat were not also saved. God loves cowards too.

And so we want to ask a question of ourselves and our congregation which is a little like the one we asked last week when Jesus told us to feed the crowds. To what is Jesus mercifully and powerfully calling you today? Do you have a neighbor whose name you do not know? Do you have a friend who is alone or afraid or in some need? Christ has not called us to the safety of the boat while the world dies around us. He has called us in stormy times to get out and be his people on the waves. The good news is that even Peter struggled with this and Jesus was right there with his hand. He got back to the boat and all was well.

This is not always neat and tidy, it does involve real risk and there is no insurance policy to blunt the risk except Resurrection and the Parousia. Our world tells us we are nuts, just as Peter had been nuts to turn around to the hungry crowds with only a little bread and fish and offer to feed them. Likewise he is nuts to get out of the boat, but faith makes us a little nutty by worldly standards. That is a good thing.

This sermon will challenge the hearer to think and act differently than expected or is considered normal. It might be a good idea for the preacher to have a very concrete example of when this congregation did exactly that and point to the blessings that came. It might also be a good idea to have a concrete example of a new opportunity to get out of the boat.

2. God is in the Boat! (OT and Gospel lesson – That the Spirit of God would inspire a holy awe in the hearer so that he/she can tremble before the presence of God and delight in his gracious words to us.)

God is here. Do we really believe that? When you kneel at this altar, when you speak those prayers, when the absolution is spoken, do you hear his voice? Would you come to church with a different attitude if you expected a miracle to happen today? Paul relates that the ancients prayed “Maranatha” or “Come Lord Jesus” at their worship services (I Cor 16:22). They seem to have sincerely thought that the end of the world would happen while they gathered for the Sacrament. “Will it be today?”

The disciples, it says, were more afraid of the Jesus who walked on water, calmed the waves, and got in the boat with them than they had been when the storm raged all around them. When he finally arrived they did the only thing sensible. They worshiped him. For a Jewish boy reared in the radical monotheism of first century Judaism, that was an enormous statement right there. They believed they were in the presence of God. This was no respect paid to an emperor, this was much higher than that.

What are we looking for and more importantly what has Christ promised us in this gathering we call church? We too are here to worship him. He has promised to be here to forgive our sins, to make real and present once more the incarnate presence of the Lord of heaven and earth. He comes not in judgment today, but that day comes. He comes today to make you ready for that Day of Judgment, he comes today to build the most precious gift of all, the faith which trusts in him and finds in him the solution to every problem. God’s presence in the boat is a motivation for us to get out, get out of the cozy confines of our pew and the relationship which we find so comfortable. The disciples ended up in some pretty strange place after Jesus got in that boat. Where are we going?

This sermon will ask the hearer to consider the worship experience as a holy and awe-inspiring event. Are we ready to act accordingly? That extends to the preacher who slouches across the chancel as well.

3. How shall they hear? (Epistle Reading – That the Spirit of God would convict and embolden the hearer to delight in the Word proclaimed as a very means of God’s gracious love to human beings [and to promote the sharing of that Word.](#))

This proclaimed word is not only the word proclaimed to me but also the word which God proclaims through me!

Christ has spoken today, did you hear him? Having heard him, are you now the presence to Christ to the man or woman you will meet at Safeway on the way home? God is working through the people who are speaking here today. This is a sermon about the incarnational presence of Christ in this body. God builds the faith which he treasures so highly through the relationships which we experience here. Faith is not a solo event, but a fruit of a community. It comes from hearing another Christian, it comes because that Christian was sent to do this very thing. Church has been talking about God for too long. For too many of us, it has long ceased to be God talking to us and the body of Christ has ceased to be God talking to this world. It is high time for our ears to be open and for our lips to be loosed. God is using us right here so that he may use us out there too.

This sermon really is a challenging sort of sermon, built on the interesting progression of events which Paul relates in the Gospel. This is complex stuff and the preacher will need to exercise a little caution here. The problems really stem from an over assessment of the importance of our own deeds. The pit on one side is to make this into a legalistic motivation, as if our deeds will somehow generate a response from God, or that we are moved by some residual guilt. The other side of the coin, however, is to so diminish our role in all this that we figure it really doesn’t matter if we do anything. God will do it all.

Here is the mystery of might and mercy together. God could do it all, but he genuinely desires and delights in our service, no matter how pathetic we are at fulfilling it. In fact, he has built his entire churchly kingdom since the death of Christ on the faltering words, the hesitant steps, and the morally mixed up lives of his people. If no one preaches, they don’t hear. If they don’t hear, no one believes. But if they preach, some will believe and the Kingdom of God advances.

4. Jesus Stretches out His Hand (Gospel Reading: That the Holy Spirit would comfort and encourage the hearer to trust in Jesus even though we have acted foolishly.)

This sermon really wonders if Peter wasn’t a fool to challenge Jesus this way and get out of the boat. Is he open to the same rebuke that fell on Job’s ears today? Did he put himself in danger this way? Did he think he was doing what God wanted and found out that he was sinking? Is Jesus rescue of Peter’s sinking body really Jesus picking up his impetuous friend after another of his rather rash moves? [Jesus seems to think he was foolish for listening to the wind and waves.](#)

We often, as individuals and as a body of Christ, do foolish things. Sometimes we are sure that God is calling us to some venture only to discover that we have taken a leap and it was a pretty stupid thing to do. We have quit our job, sold our house, headed off to Concordia or some Bible College and the next thing you know we are broke and there is no job waiting for us. We have put our family at risk and ourselves as well. Here we are, embarrassed to be re-applying for our old job. What do other folks think of us? Perhaps they do perceive us as a failure.

Jesus does not stop loving us when we are foolish. Even when we make stupid, naïve, or impetuous decisions, God is tender to save us. He walks Peter back to the boat in which he belonged and which was Jesus' destination all along. The same God who smacked down Job's questioning was the one who reached down to pick up Peter. God's treatment of us may not always feel gentle, as it did not for Job, or it may feel exactly like what we need. It surely did when Peter felt Jesus' hand grabbing his arm as he was going under the waves. In any event, the promise is sure. God's love is not based on our ability to follow him, nor on the attentiveness of our ears.

For the rest of us, perhaps the one sitting smugly in the pews today who have not leapt like this, there is a word. The rest of the disciples are impressed with God's salvation of the fool. They are not recorded as smirking at Peter, nor do they chide him, rather they join him in worshipping God who rescued him. Matthew himself was one of those quavering men who stayed in the boat; he seemed to make out alright. But he was a land-loving tax collector. I wonder what John and Andrew thought of this. They were fishermen who had spent their lives on the Sea of Galilee. We who may not have been impetuous cannot think that we are somehow better for that. Rather, we are called to worship the God who lifted him out of the pit. That could have been us. Who knows what God will do with this training or make of this fool's errand we have in mind. Peter also came to a powerful preaching ministry and his letter continues to this day to comfort and inspire Christians as the very Word of God. We read it all during the last Eastertide. He was able to speak to a persecuted people because he knew what it was like to face a storm and feel that it was cresting over your head. He knew who to call upon that day too.

Anyone who is the "Ready, Fire, Aim" sort of person will know this sort of life. This person needs comfort. The rest of us who comfortably watch these guys blow up occasionally need to inspiration – sometimes this really works too. Clucking our tongues and shaking our heads only makes us look like the Pharisees who scorned Jesus on the cross. That looked like a fool's errand too. But it redeemed every fool who calls upon the name of Jesus.

5. [Whose voice shall we listen to? \(OT and Gospel - That the Holy Spirit would tune to the hearer to listen to Jesus' voice.\)](#)

This sermon wants to take on current culture and equip the person to confront and navigate the current culture in which science is held up as an alternative to faith. Science is often held up as the alternative to faith. Many Christians would hear God's soliloquy in Job's book and say that they have indeed peered into telescopes and understood the very things which God describes. They did not see angels singing. They saw the Big Bang. But this is a fundamental misreading of both faith and science.

Scientism, the believe in science, which is not really science, is a faith system as well. It holds that scientific inquiry does answer the deepest and most profound questions of life. We should turn to science for answers to all our questions. We cannot dispute that science does indeed answer some questions, what philosophers would call efficient causal questions. In layman's terms, Science helps us make better widgets. It helps us understand the processes which take place in our own bodies and the world around us. But it cannot really answer the questions of why we are here, where we came from, where we are going. It cannot tell us what is good or right or beautiful.

But science, for some is a powerful voice calling them to trust. That is a religion, scientism we label it.

Jesus also calls us to trust. Here the preacher will want to transition to the Gospel lesson because Job only serves to destroy our trust in our own knowledge. Job has had his whole world fall apart. His children have all died, his wealth is gone, and his health has collapsed. All of this happened rather suddenly. Peter of course is sinking under the waves. At that point one needs a savior. Jesus says he can save. He reaches out his hand and lifts Peter out of danger. Job, disabused of his arrogance and prideful questioning, was restored to health and position by the blessing of God.

The Gospel is that the Holy Spirit calls and creates in us hearts and minds and lives which hear that voice of Jesus and believe in the promises that Jesus speaks. There are many alternatives out there, scientism is just one of them. There are many wolves in sheep's clothing who would lead us astray. This is just one of them.