

Sermon for Sunday, August 13, 2017 - "Saving Help"

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 13, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Saving Help

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This story has become the stuff of cliches and pop psychology.

We're critical of people who act like they walk on water, as if they can do no wrong. We worry about those who seem blind to the faults of others - "he thinks she walks on water - just wait." When things look bleak, we lament, "We need someone who can walk on water, do the impossible, turn things around."

This story is most often used as encouragement to take risks. The title of a popular Christian book advises, "If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat." In the church and the larger culture, walking on water is associated with doing great things, stepping out in boldness, moving past fear.

With all that stuff in the background, we often hear this text as a whole lot of advice versus lots of lessons that we can apply to daily life:

Lesson #1 - Don't get a big head; you can't walk on water.

Lesson #2 - Don't expect miracles from others, be realistic.

Lesson #3 - Peter got out of the boat, so should we.

We should step out in faith to make a difference in the world even when we're afraid.

We should stretch to give a little more money.

We should risk trying again in a difficult relationship.

Lesson #4 - Peter was fine while he kept his eyes on Jesus; we should do the same.

We should focus on our spiritual lives.

We should not be distracted by our fears or by things going well; we should be focused on God.

Those are all good lessons; there is wisdom there - solid advice. But the thing is, we need something much greater than advice. Events in Charlottesville, Venezuela, Jerusalem and around the world need to be met with so much more than advice. Advice doesn't change our hard, angry, fearful hearts. Advice doesn't bring peace when violence and hatred erupt. Advice isn't going to get us out working for change over the long haul.

We know we should be bold and courageous but there are big storms raging out there. We know we should focus on God but there are so many other important things demanding our attention. And those winds and waves are really strong.

Even the best advice isn't enough. In fact, advice can make things worse. The more advice we get, the greater the chances that we won't measure up to whatever is being recommended. This can get us curved in on ourselves and our shortcomings rather than focused on God, more afraid of taking risks lest we fail again.

We need something more. Like Peter that day on the sea, we need to be saved. We need to be saved not only for life after death, but for life now. When Peter called out to Jesus, "Lord, save me", he wasn't talking about heaven. He was talking about the here and now. Our lives here and now need saving help, not just advice, so that we can live boldly, courageously, faithfully.

We need to be saved from the sin that holds us back us and overwhelms us.
We need to be set free from the fear that keeps us on the boat, that causes us to panic.
We need to be raised up from all that threatens to pull us underwater.

We need Jesus to save us.

We need Jesus to do what he did for the disciples that day on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus didn't just stand on the shore and yell helpful suggestions. He came to be with them in the storm. Jesus didn't just advise Peter to take a risk; Jesus called Peter to come out towards him. And when Peter started to sink, Jesus didn't recommend that Peter keep looking at him; Jesus reached out his hand to lift Peter up.

We, too, need Jesus to be with us, to call us out, to lift us up.

And that is what Jesus does, again and again, each new day. Jesus is present with us and for us always as he was for those disciples in that storm. Jesus knows all of what it is to be human - he knows all the winds, waves and struggles we face, even death. Even death could not stop him from being fully present with us. The risen Christ is now everywhere with us. It is because Christ Jesus is with us so that we can follow the commands he gives in this story - to take heart and not be afraid.

Jesus also calls us out to where he is.

It isn't that we have to take risks on our own and go into the unknown alone. Jesus is out there, too, calling us to himself. His call is what makes it possible for us to risk, to be bold, to step out in faith. Jesus calls us out into the turbulent world that God so loves, a world so in need of courageous service and leadership. And whenever we start to sink, Jesus reaches out his hand to lift us up. He raises us up through the care of others, through his words of promise and forgiveness, through the meal of his love. He lifts us up so that we, too, can lift others.

We need so much more than advice. We need saving help. Thanks be to God, Jesus Christ has come to save us each new day. His presence, his call, and his care lift us up and set us free. Because of Jesus, we can take heart and be courageous, even if we can't walk on water.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.