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Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“Hearing in the Midst of the Storm”

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are two things going on in the Holy Gospel that we heard this morning. Two things that produce remarkably different results. There is what the disciples of Jesus **saw**, and what they **heard**. And what they saw with their eyes scared them, and caused uncertainty in them, and produced doubt in them! But what they heard with their ears did the exact opposite. What they heard comforted them, and gave them security, and produced faith. And as we will soon see, this is true not only of Jesus’ disciples then, but also of you and I still today.

And so as this account begins, Jesus sends out His disciples onto the Sea of Galilee at night. He Himself stays behind to pray. And remember, as we heard last week, this is why He had gone out to that region in the first place – to be alone to pray. But He didn’t get the chance because the crowds had followed Him and met Him on His arrival. And so now, after a long day of taking care of the crowds by healing them and feeding them, He finally gets to be alone. He dismisses the crowds, He sends His disciples out, and He goes up by Himself into the mountains to pray. . . . Now, the disciples were probably not too thrilled about going out onto the Sea at night. The four fishermen among them certainly knew better, for the violent wind storms that swept down from the mountains onto the Sea of Galilee most often happened at night. And they had already been caught in one of these before, when Jesus was with them but asleep in the front of the boat. That time He had been there to save them, but this time they were alone. But at Jesus’ word and direction, they go, and sure enough, they get caught in a storm!

And so this night turns out to be a long hard struggle – trying to keep the water out of the boat, trying to make progress into the wind, making sure the sails don’t rip. Nerves are frayed, they probably begin yelling at one another, and . . . who’s great idea was this anyway?! Thanks for getting us into this, Jesus! Yeah, thanks a lot! . . . You know how that is. You might’ve even said those very words before yourself. I know I have. When we try to be faithful, we try to do what God desires, we try to follow Jesus and His Word, but instead of things going smoothly we find ourselves in the middle of a storm! And its not our fault we’re here, right? You put us here Jesus. You’re the one who pressed us into the boat

against our better judgment. Its your fault, and now look! Thanks a lot!

But for the disciples, things go from bad to worse. For after struggling through the night with the storm, in the wee hours of the morning, just before dawn, in the fourth watch of the night, as if the storm isn't enough, they now begin to see ghosts! It *looks* like Jesus, but its walking on the water! It's a phantasm, a ghost, they think, and they begin crying out – literally *screaming* – in terror and fear. Because judging by what they can see – the storm, with its strong winds and high waves, their struggling to sail their boat, the ghost walking toward them – things are most definitely not good! They're being closed in upon on all sides . . . and they're all by themselves . . . where're they gonna go? How are they gonna get out of this?

And again, we know what that feels like. When things in our lives start going from bad to worse. When it feels as if life is closing in all around us, and we're all by ourselves, with no place to go. When everything we see around us is definitely not good . . .

But through the shrieks of their screaming, through the deafening crashes of the waves against their boat, through the howling of the wind, they hear a voice. Now, that in itself is miraculous, because with all those other noises they probably had trouble even hearing each other! But through all of that, they hear the voice of Jesus, not shouting, but simply speaking to them. They hear the voice that they know best, the voice of the Good Shepherd. ***“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”*** And despite of what they see all around them, by this hearing, their faith is restored. They know they are okay. Because Jesus isn't just telling them here *“Hey guys, its me!”* The phrase translated here as “it is I” is actually Jesus speaking His divine name – *“Take heart; do not be afraid; I AM.”* It is not a ghost walking toward them, but the great I AM. It is God Himself, in the flesh. It is the One who made the heavens and the earth, the wind and the waves. It is the God who saves His people. And upon *hearing* this, that they are not alone but the Almighty God is with them, they are comforted. For even though the storm is still raging on, by hearing, their faith is restored. The Word of God from Jesus has given them confidence and hope. What they saw scared them. What they heard gave them faith. It is as we are told in Romans chapter 10: ***“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.”***

Now, this is important, because many times you'll hear people talk about the presence of God being everywhere, as if that's all that matters and going to church really doesn't matter. But look at this story here. God was certainly with the disciples on the boat in the storm because of His *omnipresence* – because He is present everywhere – but that was no comfort to the disciples! And its really no comfort to us, because of what we see happening around us, the troubles of this world and life. And so the Twin Towers fell and the Pentagon burned. Was God there? Yes, He's omnipresent. Are we therefore comforted? A loved one dies or is disfigured in an accident, miners get stuck in a flooded mine, children get

abducted. Was God there? Yes, He's omnipresent. Are we therefore comforted? No. We become confused, and what happened to the disciples happens to us – we become scared and uncertain and doubts begin to arise. And what we see misleads us, and Satan is delighted. . . . No, we need to know that God is not just present everywhere, in some mystical way; we need to know that He is here for us. That He is here in the flesh. That He is here with His love, with His forgiveness, with His care and blessing. And for that we need His Word. For we have His promise that He is graciously present for us here in His Word – the Word made flesh, and the Word that enters our ears and hearts and gives us comfort, security, and faith. . . . One of my professors at the seminary once said, “*The bigger God is for you, the less God He is for you.*” We need Him small; we need Him here for us.

And that is what happened for the disciples, as Jesus comes to them on the water, and as they hear His voice and His Word. And by *hearing* their faith is restored. And that this has happened we can see most certainly through Peter, who one moment is screaming and struggling with the rest of the disciples, and the next moment is willing to jump out of the boat and risk life and limb! For faith is not content with simply knowing that God in Jesus is there. Faith desires communion with Jesus, to be where He is, to walk where He walks. The Word of God that enters the ear and works faith in the heart produces action and works in our lives. And so ignoring what he sees and relying on what he has heard, Peter in faith responds: “***Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.***” And these are not words of doubt, but of faith. And with a single word, “***come,***” Peter does it. Leaving doubt and fear behind he walks by faith . . . until again his eyes mislead him. And it doesn't take long for his eyes to trump his ears, for doubt to once again creep into his sinful heart, and the result is predictable . . . he begins sinking like a *petros* – like a rock! And left with nothing to stand on, nothing to rely on, nothing at all, he cries out, “***Lord, save me.***” And the Lord does. Reaching His hand out and taking hold of Peter.

And that is the hand that has reached out and taken hold of you as well. The hand of the Lord become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. The hand of the Lord which was stretched out and nailed to the cross in your place. The hand of the Lord which once lay lifeless in the grave but which, risen from the dead, reached out and took hold of a doubting Thomas. The hand of the Lord which touched those no one else would touch – the lepers, the dead, the unclean, the tax collectors, the sinners, the outcast and cripple and diseased. That is the hand that has also taken hold of you, when in the midst of sin, while you were still a sinner and dead in your sin, He took hold of you and pulled you through the waters of Holy Baptism and saved your life, making you His own. His hand, His Word giving you life and faith.

And in this new life of faith, our Lord has called to us to “***come.***” To live by faith. To have communion with Him, to walk where He walks, to take up our cross and follow Him. And

we try – don't we try? But it doesn't take long for our eyes to trump our ears, for doubt to once again creep into our sinful hearts, for life to seem too much to handle . . . and the result is predictable. We begin sinking. And how many times have we sunk just this week? Wondering about the future, wondering about our situations, taking matters into our own hands, relying on our own wisdom, trusting what we can see as true instead of what our Lord has told us is true. How many times have we sunk just this week?

But your Lord is here for you. In a small, unimpressive looking church, in small, unimpressive looking means . . . He is here for you. And so gathered in the presence of God, who is not just big and mystical so that we have to wonder how to reach Him, but who made Himself small and so is here for you, we cry out in repentance with Peter ***"Hosanna!"*** ***"Lord, save me!"*** Because we are sinking in our sins, sinking in our doubts and fears, sinking . . . But through the tumult of this world, and of our scared and confused hearts and minds, comes the Word of God. Not shouting to us, but speaking. Almost, as with Elijah, like a whisper, especially when compared to the howling and roaring of the evil and sin around us! But it is enough. Because it is the voice that we know best, the voice of the Good Shepherd. The voice that restores our faith. The voice that spoke from the cross – where everything seemed the most out of control! – and says to us, *"It is I. I AM. I AM with you. I AM the resurrection and the life. I AM the Good Shepherd. I AM your comfort and peace, your food and drink, your life and forgiveness and salvation. Peace be with you."* And we have peace. The storms are stilled. For the Word of God is powerful and does what it says. Our sins are forgiven. Our souls are fed and nourished. Our God and Saviour are here **for us**. And by hearing, we are comforted and restored. By hearing, we have confidence and hope. What we see scares us. What we hear gives us faith.

"O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And with that Jesus and Peter are back in the boat, and the boat becomes a little church. The disciples worship and confess, ***"Truly you are the Son of God."*** And this we do too, and its why that part of the church you're sitting in is called the *nave*, from the Latin word for boat. You're in the boat, by the hand of your Saviour, and here we too confess, ***"Truly you are the Son of God."*** And although you cannot see Him, you hear Him, and your faith is strengthened and restored. For as He says to you ***"I forgive you all your sins,"*** you know that they are. As He says to you ***"Take eat, take drink, this is My body, this is My blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sin"*** you know that they are. As He says to you, ***"Depart in peace,"*** you know that you do. For you have heard the voice of your Good Shepherd, the voice that you know best. And His Word is powerful and does what it says.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through

faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.