

Matthew 14:22-33

I have a feeling that if Peter had written this hymn, it would have sounded slightly different from the way we just sang it. The first verse would have been the same. "And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come." But as for verse three..."Just as I am though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without..." and here Peter would have written not, "O Lamb of God, I come," but "O Lamb of God, I sink! I sink!"

Peter is always interesting to observe, but here in this story he is especially intriguing. One minute he is a hero of the faith, venturing out upon the stormy waters. But in typical "St. Peter-like" fashion, his heroism turns into defeat as he takes his eyes off Jesus and sinks beneath the waves. Perhaps this story could be used as a litmus test to determine whether someone is a man or woman of faith. Rather than handling rattlesnakes, which is what some churches do to prove their faith, (if you die from a snakebite, your faith was too weak, they say), these churches, instead, could take their members down to the river. Those who can walk on the water have a strong faith. Those who sink...well, they aren't there yet in their spiritual life.

How would you fare? Would you make it across? make it just half-way like Peter? or sink with your very first step? Even if we sang a hymn of inspiration first, and confessed the words of the Apostles' Creed as we stepped out onto the water, you and I would sink immediately. You see, Jesus does not stand in the middle of the Missouri River and bid us come to Him there. He stood in the water for Peter and bid him come, but that is not where Christ stands for us today.

The hymn we just sang can be used in a Lutheran context, and we do, but at face value it is not a Lutheran hymn because it does not proclaim where Jesus is standing so that we can come to Him there. That's why Billy Graham could use it for his altar calls, as if coming to Jesus is as simple as making a decision to come to Him. But Peter made that decision and he never got to Jesus. He was too weak, too sinful, too full of doubts, and conflicts, and fears. Jesus had to come to him, take him by the hand, and save him from drowning.

Now Christ does stand in the water for us, but not in the water down by the river, or at the Lake of the Ozarks. He stands in your baptismal waters. Christ stands in the water of the font, and not just when we have a baptism. He stands always within those waters for you, so that by returning to your baptism through confession and absolution, you are returning to, you are coming to Christ. Christ stands in the bread and wine on the altar. You come to Jesus in His Sacrament because He bids you to come and promises to be there for you. By coming here to God's House when His Word is proclaimed, you are coming to Christ. You could have sang in your car on the way over here today, "O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

But even though we came, we're just like Peter. Up one minute, down the next. Strong in the faith one Sunday, but the next Sunday temptation defeats us and we do not come to Jesus; we find something better to do. Like Peter, you and I are always sinking beneath the waves. One look at the approaching storm and we take our eyes off Jesus. One big wave of temptation comes at us, and just that quickly we lose faith.

"O you of little faith," Jesus said to Peter. Why did He say that? At least Peter had the nerve to step out onto the water. What would Jesus say to you? "O you of strong faith?" or "...of little faith?" What makes faith big or little? In answer we have the tendency to point to something within ourselves. But a faith focused on what we are doing is not even faith; it's sinful pride, arrogance.

Peter had a little faith because he had a little Jesus. At first Jesus was big to him, and so he stepped out on the water with confidence. But when the stormy waves looked bigger to him than Jesus looked, Peter's faith shrunk immediately. A little Jesus equals a little faith. And that's why Peter sank beneath the waves. He believed the waves would hurt him more than Jesus could help him. The waves were bigger than Jesus.

So how big is your faith? Well, how big is Jesus to you? Is He always there for you, or just some of the time? Can He pull you through all your problems, or just some of them? Is there a stormy wave in your life right now which looks bigger than Jesus? If so, then you have a little faith, because to you Jesus is not big, but little. And since Jesus is the Word of God spoken into your ears, and the body and blood on the altar placed into your mouth, how big or little Jesus is to you is pretty obvious by how much you hunger for these holy things. If the Christ on the altar is little to you, then you will have little desire to eat and drink of Him there. But if you see Christ as big for you, then you will want His Sacrament often, and you will want His words in your ears always.

We're like Peter. The bigger the storms in our life become, the smaller Jesus looks. But even a little faith is faith. Faith, big or little, always cries out to Jesus. "Lord, save me!" Peter cried. Even with his little faith he looked to Christ. And no matter how big or little Jesus looks to us, He is always there to deliver us. He reached out His hand and pulled Peter out of the water. And that is what Jesus is doing for you. Whether you are here today with a big faith, or with a little faith, Jesus is here for you. He pulls you out of the waves of temptation, not depending on the size of your faith, but because He is gracious and merciful.

No storm could keep Jesus from helping Peter. No sweeping wave could prevent Him from reaching out His hand and pulling Peter out of certain death. And this is just as true for you. No wave, no matter how big, no matter how much it frightens you, can prevent Jesus from coming to your rescue. In our hymn we sing, "O Lamb of God, I come, I come," but these words really should be turned around. It's not what we say to Jesus that matters so much, but what He says to us. Not, "O Lamb of God, I come," but "O you of little faith, I come, I come."

And He does come. Not because we deserve it; we don't. He should have left Peter there in the water, and He should leave us drowning in our sins. But that is not His way. His way is to have mercy. His way is to forgive. And so here you and I are, and we like Peter, are sinking beneath the waves. Our sins, our guilt are overwhelming. We cannot rise above them. We sink daily. We fall. We are defeated. But right here and now Jesus forgives you. Because He reached out His hands on a cross for you, He reaches out His hands to you now and they are full of pardon, full of forgiveness for you. At His altar he reaches out His hand and places into your mouth His body and blood. "This is for you," He says, "for the remission of your sins." Whatever sins, whatever guilt, whatever damnation is sweeping over you, here in His Sacrament He removes it for you. Here He takes you by the hand, as He did for Peter, and joins you to Himself in mercy.

And so, "just as you are though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without," your Lamb of God says to you today here in His Word, here in His Sacrament: Do not be afraid...to you I come, I come. Amen.