

## ***ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***

***Matthew 14:22-33***

Most people do not like tests. And yet, most of life is filled with them. There are tests in school, a test for a driver's license, blood tests, heart tests, brain tests, and blood sugar tests. And then there is everyone's favourite: The Pop Quiz!

In our Gospel reading for today, as the disciples, many of them fishermen, many of them with callused hands from rowing against the waves and against the wind day in and day out, head off for the "other side," which our reading does not point out until later, means "enemy territory, the land of unclean gentiles," not one of them suspects it is time for a pop quiz. And that element of surprise is undoubtedly what makes the pop quiz so much fun for the teacher!

So they are out there rowing against the wind while Jesus is, perhaps literally, praying up a storm. It is important to note, however, that there is no indication at all from Matthew that they are afraid. This is what they normally do and they are doing it, we can presume, reasonably well.

For reasons not explained, Jesus strolls out on the water toward the boat very early in the morning. It is when they see Jesus walking on the water that we are told they become terrified. Not that they actually recognize him! The distant figure could have been a ghost.

But now the disciples are truly terrified. The same word is used to express Herod's fear at getting the news from the magi that a child was born to be king; the same fear that rendered Zechariah mute when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in the Temple;

the same fear they will experience later in the Upper Room when they think once again it is a ghost appearing after Jesus is crucified.

So it was not the storm that was testing the disciples, but rather the presence of Jesus in the storm. And it was not simply his presence, but what he had to say that would be the test: “Take heart; do not be afraid; it is I.” “Take heart,” of course, recalls Moses’ words to the Israelites on the edge of the Red Sea with the pursuing Egyptians right behind them. “Take heart; do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.” And “do not be afraid” runs through the Gospel narratives spoken by angels to Joseph and Mary, by Jesus to Peter, John, and James on the mount of the Transfiguration, by an angel to the women at the tomb, and, related to the story in the Gospel reading today, by Jesus, as he sends the disciples into the mission field.

Related by the fact that the story begins with healing and feeding thousands of people, and when they get to the other side of the lake they will be asked to join Jesus in healing a crazy man who is so deranged he has been kept chained in a cave on the outskirts of town. That is, there will be no rest for the weary and frightened! It is always time for mission work, now!

Finally, the words, “it is I,” that takes us back to the burning bush and God’s thundering, “I am who I am,” and all the “I am” statements of Jesus in St. John’s Gospel.

The presence of the unrecognized Jesus’ on the sea, was a threat to the disciples, however, the real test, the pop quiz for the early morning would be, can they trust his three-fold word to them, “Take heart; have no fear; it is I”? Can they trust what he says? Everyone but Peter appears to be struck dumb by the pop quiz.

Peter takes a novel approach: rather than respond, he decides to

test Jesus. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water!” Peter apparently prefers the role of tester, to the role of being tested. His words resemble the words of Satan testing Jesus in the wilderness, “If you are the son of God....” And later, this behavior of Peter’s would result in his telling Jesus how to go about being the Christ, inviting the rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan.” For now he will soon learn that the disciple is not greater than the master, when Jesus responds with one word: “Come.”

Well, if all of us had a nickel for every time Jesus says, “come,” we would all be very rich. Of course it is the very fact that he says to us, “Come,” that does make us very rich indeed. Peter now has no choice. His pop quiz is met with yet another. He jumps out of the boat and walks toward Jesus.

When Jesus says, “Come,” we have to move. That’s all there is to it. We are to trust that Jesus is who he says he is, and get out of our boats when he says come. As we know, Peter does quite well out there on the sea until he “notices” the wind, and fright takes over, he loses his focus, as we say, and begins to sink, and cries out, “Save me.” Jesus reaches out and takes Peter by the hand.

When we trust Jesus’ word, “Take heart, do not be afraid, it is I,” and when we jump out of our boats when he says, “Come”, his outstretched hand will be there to save us every time. Not, however, without the necessary rebuke, “You have so little faith...”

Those of us who live in more polite societies, and therefore neither give, nor receive, rebukes easily, may be inclined to wonder why Jesus could not have found something to praise in Peter for his noble effort. But this story is not about cultivating self-esteem; it is about the grace of the Son of God who saved a

disciple from death, before his faith could qualify him for anything. Jesus' rebuke told the truth in love and gave Peter yet another lesson in discipleship.

So, no one earns or deserves the right to be saved. It is as Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all." No matter what side of the water, what side of the storm we may find ourselves on, Jesus promises to be there.

Our task is to recognize his presence. He is always walking toward us. Listen to his words. Trust who he is. Jump out of our boats. Ask for his help when we need it. Be saved. And get ready for mission in enemy territory. Because when the Lord gets ready, you gotta move. Jump out of your boat reach out your hand and say, "Here am I! When the Lord gets ready you gotta move and we all gotta know, the Lord is always ready, right now.

**AMEN.**