

Pentecost 10A (8/13/17)

1 Kings 19:9-18

Psalm 85:8-13

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

We trust pride and carelessness and violence to overwhelm the world more than we trust God to redeem it. Nevertheless, the Lord enters into even the worst circumstances in order to reach out to us and speak a word of peace. God does not promise to bring our storms to an immediate end, but rather to bridge the distance across the waves, come to us when all appears to be lost, reach out his hand, and step into the boat.

Eternal Father, strong to save,
 whose arm has bound the restless wave,
 who bade the mighty ocean deep
 its own appointed limits keep:
 oh, hear us when we cry to thee
 for those in peril on the sea.

O Savior, whose almighty word
 the winds and waves submissive heard,
 who walked upon the foaming deep,
 and calm amid the storm didst sleep:
 oh, hear us when we cry to thee
 for those in peril on the sea.¹

This hymn has been associated with seafarers since the end of the nineteenth century, and especially with seafaring branches of the British and American military. It has been used on ships for ceremonial and devotional purposes so regularly that it has become known as “The Navy Hymn.” At the request of Winston Churchill himself, it was sung as part of a service aboard the Royal Navy battleship Prince of Wales on August 9th, 1941, as the Prime Minister traveled to meet with President Roosevelt to draft the Atlantic Charter.

¹ William Whiting, “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, #756.

William Whiting wrote “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” in 1860 after surviving a frightening storm at sea, an experience that instilled in him the conviction that **God is sovereign over the waters of the deep**. Since God sets the ocean’s boundaries² and directs the wind and waves, according to the biblical witness, Whiting’s verses proclaim that God is capable of rescuing us from their dangers.³ What’s more, **Christ exercises this same power over the sea, traversing the waves on foot and stilling storms with a word**. “Take heart, it is I,” he calls to his terrified disciples through the wind in our Gospel from Matthew today. “It is I,” from the Greek *ego eimi*, might also be translated “I am.” “Take heart, *I am*,” Jesus says, echoing the response God gives to Moses when he asks for God’s proper name.⁴ In this way, Jesus associates himself with the Almighty One, the God of all creation. And once he steps into the boat, the storm ceases. Astonished and relieved, the disciples confess, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

It’s the perfect story to buttress the faith of all who place themselves at the mercy of the sea, so no wonder Whiting’s hymn is sung aboard battleships. **“Eternal Father, Strong to Save” is a poetic affirmation that God, whom we have come to know and trust in Christ, also watches over sailors as they navigate the natural and political turbulence of international waters.**

If we are tempted to take the promise of God’s rescue at sea too literally, however, we only have to remember the heartrending images of little Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who drowned and washed ashore in Turkey as his family

² Genesis 1:9-10

³ Psalm 107:25-29.

⁴ Exodus 3:13-14.

attempted to flee to Greece in September 2015. The war and ensuing humanitarian crisis in their homeland compelled the Kurdis to take an enormous risk, boarding an overcrowded and unreliable vessel that was quickly overwhelmed by the sea. Alan died along with his older brother, Ghalib, and his mother, Rihanna.⁵

In light of this tragedy, I am compelled to ask: **Was the Eternal Father not strong to save *them*? Of all those who are in peril on the sea, are refugees like the Kurdi family not the most in need of God's care?**

As usual, my skepticism places me in the same boat as the disciples, and specifically Peter. Although we may admire Peter for heeding Jesus' call to step out onto the waves, we should not forget that the call comes in response to Peter's demand that Jesus prove himself. Jesus has already reassured the disciples: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." But **Peter does not take him at his word, so he puts the Lord to the test**⁶: "Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water." The test, however, is destined to fail because it is administered on Peter's terms and according to Peter's degree of faith. **Peter has an idea of how the Lord ought to act in a storm, yet he trusts the storm to drown him more than he trusts Jesus to uphold him. Peter is distracted and distraught,⁷ so he loses his focus on Jesus' quiet presence with him in the chaos.**

Truthfully, I am also distracted and distraught in the face of so many storms throughout the world – those that have been raging for years and those that are now brewing – especially in light of the disproportional impact they have on people like

⁵ Bryan Walsh, <http://time.com/4162306/alan-kurdi-syria-drowned-boy-refugee-crisis/>.

⁶ See Matthew 4:7.

⁷ See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 312.

Alan, Ghalib, and Rihanna Kurdi. So, there I stand with Peter, sinking in the sea of my own suspicion that God is not, in fact, strong to save the least of these. **I have an idea about how God ought to act in uncertain times, yet I trust pride and carelessness and violence to overwhelm the world more than I trust God to redeem it. So, even when I step out onto the waves in faith, I am bound to lose my focus on the Lord's quiet presence in the storm.**

It's a good thing the end of the story does not depend on me. Like Peter, my understanding is incomplete and my faith is lacking, but the story our Gospel tells today is finally about *God's* faithfulness. It's worth noting that the storm doesn't stop until after Jesus has crossed the sea, called to the disciples, rescued Peter, and gotten into the boat. God does not promise to bring our storms to an immediate end, even if that's what we would prefer, but rather to **bridge the distance across the waves, come to us when all appears to be lost, reach out his hand, and step into the boat.**⁸ **If the Lord is Emmanuel – God-with-us – then we can trust God to join us at the heart of our storms. And, the Lord who tramples the waves⁹ is the same Lord who hangs from the cross, enduring all the injustice the world unleashes on people like Alan Kurdi, the most vulnerable among us.**

Dear church, the Lord enters even the worst circumstances in order to reach out to us and speak a word of peace. So, in humble trust, we persist in crying to God for those in peril on the sea. But by Christ's accompaniment, we are also emboldened to accompany them, joining them at the heart of their storms until God finally stills them all.

⁸ M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 329-30.

⁹ Job 9:8.