Sunday, March 11, 1984
WALKING ON WATER
Matthew 14:22-33

In the sermons, during this season of Lent, we will be looking at some of the miracle stories from the life of Jesus. We will be asking such questions as: why were these stories remembered by the early church? And what do they have to say to us in our time? Let's now look at the story of Jesus' walking on the water.

Jesus had been with a large crowd all day long. The Bible tells us that there had been about 5,000 persons. He had been teaching them and healing some who were sick. It had been on this same day that the feeding of the 5,000 had taken place. So, when evening came, Jesus was worn out physically and mentally.

We know how it is when we've been with a large crowd all day, particularly when one has been in charge of, or responsible for, the group. At the end of such a day, we normally want to be alone for a while, away from people. Jesus was no different in this respect. Now that the day was over, he dismissed the crowd. Then he asked his disciples to take the boat out on to the lake, and he went alone into the hills to pray. He knew when he had to be alone.

This was the usual pattern for Jesus. Often in the evening he went away alone in the hills or to some other quiet spot to pray and to rest — to regain his physical and his spiritual strength. He knew that some of the richest things in life come only when the crowd is gone for a time, when crowd pressures and crowd thinking are left behind, and we can confront ourselves and be more aware of God's presence.

Some of us, however, don't like to be alone — at least not for very long. We can't stand too much silence and quiet. To be alone means not only to be away from people, but also from all distractions: away from the radio, television, and other voices. It is when we are sometimes completely alone that we have to face ourselves, and, having done that, we can be more aware of God's presence, which we otherwise tend to ignore. Our lives need this change of pace. One individual calls this kind of rhythm the "outstroke of activity alternated with the backstroke of renewal." And neither is complete without the other.

So, in its basic structure, this story already tells us something: that there come times when we have to leave the word in order to be alone with ourselves and God. We leave in order to return.

While Jesus was alone in the hills above the lake, his disciples were in a boat on the lake. Perhaps they were fishing while Jesus prayed, or maybe just relaxing. While on the lake, the wind came up and the waves grew very large. The boat was a good distance from the shore. Jesus must've sensed, or perhaps he saw, what was happening from the hills. At any rate, he came to the disciples in the midst of their fear and distress. He came to them walking across the water. When the disciples saw him coming toward them, they were surprised and afraid, but once Jesus spoke to them, he calmed their fears.

Peter, however, who was always the impulsive disciple, asked Jesus if it would be possible for him to also walk on the water. Jesus told him to come ahead. So, Peter began to walk, but after a bit he thought about what he was doing and then looked down at the water and began

to sink into it, so he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus reached out his hand and pulled him out of the water, and they got into the boat. The storm subsided, and they all went back to shore.

Stories such as this one were remembered by the disciples and then the early church, not only because of their unusual circumstances, but also because of what such stories teach. Stories are usually the best way for us to remember basic truths.

Let’s look at this story with this in mind and attempt to discover some of the deeper meanings. Then we’ll understand why it was remembered and why it meant so much to have it told over and over again.

1. Note first that the story illustrates in a concrete way human distress. The Gospel of Matthew says that “the wind was against the disciples.” The wind came up against them, and not when they had embarked on some foolish enterprise of their own choice, but in the “line of duty.” They were doing what Jesus had asked them to do. They were following his instructions, but “the wind was against them.”

Think about it for a moment. Isn’t this the way with all of our lives? Some of the worst storms, some of the biggest obstacles, some of our greatest troubles seem to come to us when we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. An individual is faithfully carrying out his job, and all of a sudden trouble comes, ad the trouble is not of his or her own making. The wind is against us. Such storms come into the lives of the righteous, as well as the wicked. “God makes his rain to fall upon the just and the unjust.” We’re doing what we think is right, and all of a sudden everything goes wrong. Many people involved in the Commonwealth failure must’ve felt this way.

Like the disciples in the story, our little boat seems so small, and the sea of life seems so wide and unpredictable in comparison, and when the wind rises and the waves grow and the boat rocks, we feel quite helpless and at the mercy of the forces around us. We’ve all had that experience. This story describes life as we know it.

2. But note secondly, the story goes on to show how Christ, God in the flesh, often comes to us when the limits of our human resources have been reached and passed — when we know that there is nothing more we can do. In fact, this is the story of the Christian faith. God came to us in Christ because the limits of human resources had been reached. We human beings could not save ourselves on our own power. We can only go so far without God. God is always needed if our lives are to be complete and meaningful.

It was reported that when King Tut’s tomb was opened many years ago, some wheat was discovered that had been there in the dry darkness for more than 4,000 years. When it was brought out and planted, it grew and multiplied. All it needed was to get into the right relationship with the earth and the sun.

In the same way as that wheat was limited in what it could do until it got into the right relationship with the earth and the sun, so also are we human beings limited until we get into the right relationship with God and with others. There are limits to our human resources. In the final analysis we cannot save ourselves on our own power.

Sometimes, however, we do not realize this fact until, like the disciples, we find ourselves adrift, with the wind against us and the waves high, in the middle of a storm. They we may come to the realization that we are helpless without God. Oftentimes it takes a very painful and

graphic experience to teach us this truth, and, even then, some of us do not learn or do not remember what we have learned.

Most of us have read or heard or perhaps have seen the movie of the story of the sinking of the Titanic many years ago. In that situation, many individuals believed that they had built the unsinkable ship, that nothing could possibly hurt them. That ship was a unique symbol of our extreme pride. Thus, we are told that the band kept playing as the ship sank, not necessarily out of bravery, but because they simply could not believe that the ship would sink. The crew at first had difficulty in convincing the passengers that the ship was doomed.

However, the story we are looking at this morning from the New Testament reminds us that even the people who knew God best and most intimately have the "wind against them" at time and that we are not self-sufficient. But the Bible story goes further and also reminds us that God comes to us in these storms of life.

And even more than that, this story of Jesus walking on water goes on to say that God comes to us beyond our hope. Even though the disciples were no doubt afraid in their little boat, they did not expect Jesus at this point. How could he get to them? They had the only boat! But God can do what we cannot do. The storms of life can never stop God from getting to us.

There is yet other symbolism involved in this story. Although water is necessary for our lives, to ancient people — including the Hebrews — the raging, unruly waters of a lake or ocean symbolized powers which are opposed to God's sovereignty. Such water was seen as an instrument of destruction and chaos. This symbolism goes all the way back to the story of the flood in Noah's time. Also in the Old Testament, the nearness of death, the event which could separate an individual from God, is sometimes described as a descent into the waters of the deep.

So, Jesus walking across the waters and the fact that, after he got into the boat, the lake became calm again, certainly reminded the disciples of God's power which even ruled the wind and the waves.

3. At first, seeing Jesus walking on the water, the disciples were afraid, but then Jesus spoke to them: "Take heart; it is I. Have no fear!" Evidently the disciples weren't sure of what they were seeing coming across the waters until Jesus spoke. We all know how reassuring someone's words can be, particularly words that identify a friend.

Bible scholars tell us that this particular story had special meaning for the early church, particularly during the times of the greatest persecution of Christmas. They would recall this story and remember hos Jesus had power over all creation, how he had power to overcome evil and how he was with them in the midst of their distress. No storm could stop his coming to them, not even the raging waters. The martyrs would hear the words again: "Take heart; it is I. Have no fear!"

These are reassuring words to all of us who are in the midst of the storms of life, those of us who feel the wind is against us, and those who feel alone and as if we are in the midst of a raging sea. Jesus says, as he comes walking across the water to meet us, "Take heart; it is I. Have no fear!"

When Peter heard these words, he wanted to walk to meet Jesus, and Jesus told him to come ahead. But, like so many of us, Peter was both courageous and at the same time untrusting.

Even though he stepped out of the boat onto the water and began to walk; even though his faith was strong as he began, and it remained strong as he kept his eyes straight ahead on Jesus, he made the mistake of looking down, and once he saw the waves and felt the wind, his faith faltered. He became afraid. He realized what he was doing: walking on water. And as soon as this happened, he began to sink.

This is what happens to many of us. Sometimes in the storms of life, when our faith is strong, we can walk on water; we can be on top of the crisis; and we find ourselves doing all sorts of things that we would've never thought we could do. But then, if we stop in the middle of what we're doing and begin to worry, if we stop and think of all the difficulties and problems and how much there is yet to be done — in other words, if we begin to look down and to feel sorry for ourselves — then we may very well begin to falter and even sink.

I'm told that in the days of the sailing vessels, when a new hand climbed the narrow rope ladder to the crow's nest, the old hands would shout, "Look up! Look up!" If the lad looked down, he might very well become dizzy and fall.

So, the story of walking on water is really not very far removed from the everyday life of all of us. God still comes to us in the midst of the storms of life. No storm, no waves, nothing in the world can hold God back. We can still hear the comforting words, "Take heart; it is I. Have no fear!" Amen.