Sunday, August 12, 1990
WHEN THE WIND IS AGAINST YOU
Matthew 14:22-33

An old Irish blessing says:

"May the road rise to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rain fall soft upon your fields,
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand."

But what do you do when the wind is not at your back, but against you? When you work and work against seemingly insurmountable obstacles, when nothing seems to go right, when the wind is not at your back but in your face? We who live in the Great Plains know something about the wind being at our backs and in our faces. Pioneer accounts never fail to mention somewhere the ferocity of winds on the plains.

A man from Indiana once asked a farmer from Nebraska why barns here never have wind vanes, when east of the Mississippi almost all barns do. The seasoned farmer said, "No sense to it. When you want to see which way the wind is blowing, you look out the window to see which way the barn is leaning."

Another Nebraska farmer said that his father did develop a Nebraska wind vane: "He bolted a twelve-foot logging chain to a stout post set well into the ground, and then he could tell the wind direction by watching which way the chain was blowing." He added, "We could tell the wind was really blowing when links began to snap off the end of that chain." Another old pioneer said that one day the wind stopped, and everyone fell down.

Good old Midwest ingenuity! In one such case, an old bachelor harnessed the sandblast which ripped through his kitchen keyhole, turning his wind problem into a convenience. He would form a sandblast kitchen and place his pots and pans in it until they were spic and span.

What do you do when the wind is against you? That was the predicament in which the disciples of Jesus found themselves one night, and it's something with which all of us are familiar.

Here's what happened to the disciples according to the story in Matthew's gospel. Jesus had been with a large crowd all day long, teaching and healing. It was the same day on which he showed the disciples how to feed the crowd when the people became restless and hungry. Now Jesus was worn out physically and mentally. You know how it is when you've been with a large group of people all day, especially if you are the one in charge. You want to be alone for a while — away from people.

Jesus had dismissed the crowd, and then he asked the disciples to take the boat out on the lake while he went alone into the hills to pray. 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 rest — to regain his spiritual and physical strength.

It's a very important discipline for all of us. It is when you are alone that you have to face yourself and God. Our lives need this kind of change of pace — this rhythm between intimacy and distance.

While Jesus was alone in the hills, the disciples were in their boat on the lake. Perhaps they were fishing while Jesus prayed, or maybe simply relaxing. The boat had drifted a good distance from the shore when all of a sudden there was a wind change. Storm clouds formed, and in a very short time, the waves were huge, and the wind was against them. Jesus felt the change in the weather and perhaps saw what was happening on the lake. According to the story, 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 in the storm, they were surprised and afraid, but once they heard his voice, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear," they knew it was going to be all right.

Peter, always the impulsive one, called out to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." Was he testing the power of Jesus? Was he wanting to test his own faith? We don't know for sure. Jesus told him to come ahead. So he did. He began to walk toward Jesus. But after a bit, he thought about what he was doing, looked down at the water, and began to sink into it. He cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus reached out his hand and pulled him out of the water. They got into the boat, the storm subsided, and they all went back to the land.

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 the stories teach. The use of stories is one of the best ways for us to remember basic truths.

Note first that this story illustrates in a concrete way human distress. "The wind was against them." In this case, distress came into their lives, 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."

Hasn't this been your experience? Some of the worst storms in your life, some of the biggest obstacles, the most trouble has come when you are doing what you are supposed to be doing. Here's an individual who is faithfully carrying out her job, and all of a sudden disaster strikes. The trouble is not of her own making. The wind is against her. Such storms come into the lives of the righteous as well as the unrighteous.

"God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." You're doing what you think is right, and all of a sudden, everything seems to go wrong.

Like the disciples in the story, in the storms of life, sometimes our little boat seems so small and so vulnerable, and the sea of life seems so large and so unpredictable. When the wind rises, the waves grow, and the boat rocks, we feel quite helpless and at the mercy of the forces around us. This story describes life as we know it.

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

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 to release its power 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 others. There are limits to our individual human resources.

Sometimes, however, we do not realize this fact until, like the disciples, we find ourselves adrift, with the wind and the waves against us, high in the middle of a storm. Then we come to the realization that we cannot do it on our own. We need God and others. That's the wisdom of the first two steps in the twelve steps of A.A.: "(1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable. (2) Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." Oftentimes, it takes a very painful and graphic experience to teach us this truth, and even then, some of us have to be reminded over and over again.

Do you remember the story of the Titanic? It was widely believed that the unsinkable ship had been built. That ship was a striking symbol of our excessive 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.

This story from Matthew's gospel reminds us that even the people who know God best sometimes have the wind against them.

The good news is that the story goes one step further and also reminds us that God comes to us beyond our hope. Even though the disciples were afraid in their little boat, they did not expect Jesus to come to them. How would he get to them? But God can do what we cannot do.

There is even more symbolism in this story. Although water is necessary for our lives — to the ancient people, including the Hebrews, the raging unruly waters of a lake or ocean symbolized powers that they believed opposed God's sovereignty. Bodies of water were seen as instruments of destruction and chaos. This symbolism goes all the way back to the story of the flood in Noah's time.

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

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 across the waters until Jesus spoke. We all know how reassuring someone's voice and words can be, particularly words that identify a friend.

Bible scholars tell us that this particular story had a special meaning for the early church, especially during the times of the greatest persecution of Christians. They would recall the story and remember how 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 of evil. 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, when the wind is against 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. Like 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 long 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. As soon as this happened, he began to sink.

Isn’t this the experience of all 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 are 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 wonder how we’re going to make it, then we may very well begin to falter and sink.

It is said that in the days of the large 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, when the wind is against us. No storm, no waves, no wind can hold God back. We can still hear the comforting words, “Take heart: it is I; have no fear.” And if we keep our eyes on Jesus, then like Peter, we can even walk on water through the storm. Amen.