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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14)
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 14:22-33

It's late at night. You're on a long trip...by yourself. You're driving down a lonely road somewhere in the Midwest. You need something that will keep you awake. You may have any number of ways of keeping Mister Sandman at bay, ranging from snack foods to strong coffee. My personal choice tends to be something that is neither a food nor a beverage, though. I turn the radio on. For whatever reason, my old GM Delco AM radios, in particular, can pick up a lot of clear-channel stations after dark. One of my favorite of these stations is CFZM out of Toronto, Ontario, which is among the most clear and consistent -- and about the only one that actually plays music.

Oldies of the Fifties and Sixties, to be specific...

But then, if I happen to be motoring in the wee small hours, I might meander across the AM dial and inevitably land on some station that carries a program called Coast to Coast AM. For the uninitiated, Coast to Coast AM is everything that's wrong with talk radio wrapped into one very hard to swallow capsule. Subject matter leans heavily toward conspiracy theories, UFOs, and other assorted pseudoscientific garbage, but it's all presented in a matter-of-fact, unironic, and uncritical fashion, because whoever's talking is quite convinced that they're telling the truth!

Simply by being bizarre and ridiculous, Coast to Coast AM has kept me from falling asleep at the wheel more than once. One can almost imagine it having a place in a public safety campaign to keep drowsy drivers awake.

But then there are times when we're chugging down the highway late at night and

something unexpected happens; perhaps it's a swift change in the weather or a deer leaping across the road. Suddenly, we're jolted out of whatever highway hypnosis we'd been lulled into. And even though driving an automobile is the closest many of us will ever come to being in total control, there are always, at the very least, these sorts of reminders that we aren't. We're just as vulnerable to forces and changes beyond ourselves when we aren't in the driver's seat as when we are. Thus, any sense of "control" is an illusion. Ask a farmer, for example, how much can be done about the weather...

Yet equally problematic is the creep of language like "acts of God" into our daily discourse. So, you're saying that an "act of God" in the form of an F5 tornado destroyed your community? I don't know if God is the one we want to lay the blame on for something like that! A God who is capricious and insensitive wouldn't be a God I'd ever worship, much less put any trust in. Hopefully, when theologians start reflecting on the weather, they'll talk to a meteorologist first.

Some forces in our lives may, indeed, be the work of God; others may just be the weather. As for which is which, I'll leave that to you to figure out -- just be careful when you do so! Understandably, today's account of Jesus walking on the sea toward the disciples led me to think about matters of control and forces of nature. The disciples had been bumped off course quite a bit by the time they spotted Jesus. And how do they respond?

Matthew writes: "But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear" (14:26).

Now, before we hammer on the disciples for being afraid of the Lord, let's acknowledge the overall weirdness of the situation. They were on a boat, overnight, without Jesus, and then in the morning he comes walking up to them on the water. If you're anything like me, you'll experience being half-asleep prior to rising

for the day, and in this half-asleep state, you'll sometimes almost hallucinate, and the boundaries between dream and reality will get awfully fuzzy. If the disciples were anything like me in this regard, I would think that, were they just waking up, this would've been pretty startling, especially if they were coming out of one of those half-asleep/half-awake hallucinatory fogs...

This is wild stuff, and we need to acknowledge that...

Jesus, though, comes on to the scene with some very comforting words; he says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (14:27b). Now, what is it that we find in these words? We might not necessarily be in the same situation as the disciples; instead of a boat on the sea, we might be in a car on a lonely road at night; instead of rough waters, we might have a deer leap in front of us; instead of an unbelievable feat like walking on water, we might be lulled to boredom and eventual highway hypnosis.

But as people of faith, we can hear Jesus say, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Jesus is with us on those rough waters. Jesus is with us on those dark roads. Jesus surprises us with his comforting presence even when we think ourselves abandoned.

This is where much of American evangelical Christianity gives folks the wrong idea. With so much emphasis on the individual "finding" Jesus, there isn't much room for Jesus to find the individual. Yet I would be willing to bet the theological farm on the latter being the case more than the former. Long before a person can ever decide to follow Jesus, the Spirit has been at work planting seeds -- whether through ordinary individuals being Christ-like to that person, or through Scripture and prayer at the right place at the right time, or any number of ways unbeknownst to the person.

Most of all, Jesus is present because he promised to be present. It doesn't matter who you are or how strongly (or weakly) you believe. When Jesus said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age," I kind of wish he said, "I am with you always, whether you like it or not!" There is only one Being in this world who can be so consistently and eternally faithful to us, and that Being is God. This is the One who gave us Jesus to live and die a human life and death and to rise from the dead to conquer death forever. That said, how could our Lord not be present among us? How could our Lord not come to us and say, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid"?

Jesus has found you in lots of precarious and uncertain places and has hopefully blessed you with assurance and peace. As for the reverse -- people "finding" Jesus -- well, those of you who come across cartoons, memes, and other items of humor on the Internet may have seen the one where two nameless, churchless evangelists come to the door and ask the person standing there, "Have you found Jesus?" Indeed, Jesus was there...hiding (partially) behind the living room curtain!

One of the great gifts of the Lutheran theological tradition in which I was raised is the way it always seeks to give God the glory. Where other theologies make dramatic conversion stories the centerpiece -- and ultimately, proof -- of a living faith, I don't do things that way...and a good chunk of the Episcopal Church doesn't, either. It's not about what we do in terms of "finding" Jesus; rather, it's about what God does in taking us lost and condemned creatures and making us right with him...certainly through Jesus Christ, but not through our effort or striving. Were you inclined to think this way, this might just be a great help to you when you find yourself on a dark road or rough sea. Jesus is there whether you call upon him or not, because he promised to be there...

And he will say, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

The next time I'm driving late at night with my Delco radio tuned to Coast to Coast AM, I can think of, yes, how bizarre and ridiculous the people and topics are on there...but I can also think that for as bizarre and ridiculous they are, our Lord makes up for that in faithfulness and truth ten thousand times, and perhaps infinitely. Faith in him may not always be the antidote to fears, uncertainties, or hazards on the road of life, but it most definitely will help us endure through them. Even if we can't do it, we can still hear the words of Jesus: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Amen.