

Knowing Him Who Turns Fear into Cheer

Matthew 14:1-36

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The Lord's Day Evening

Our God and our Heavenly Father, again we turn our thoughts to the reading of Your word and to meditation upon it. And so we pray that as it is read and as it is proclaimed, O Lord our God, be pleased to make this word come home to us. Let our minds be enlightened by its truth; let our hearts be stirred up with its hope; and let our lives be changed henceforth that in Your light and truth we may walk all our days. We ask it through Christ our Savior. Amen.

Our Scripture lesson is found in the 14th chapter of Matthew's gospel. While you are finding it, let me take this opportunity to thank this congregation, its session, and its ministers for all the hospitality that has been shown to me on this weekend. It has been rich hospitality. And we just thank you for the opportunity to be among you and to enjoy your fellowship and enjoy your worship. It was just wonderful to be here, to hear the music of this place, to hear your singing, and to be with the men on Friday night. It has been a weekend of encouragement to my soul and I thank you all for that.

Hear now the word of God in Matthew chapter 14. We are going to read the whole chapter. It is a long one. But I want you to think about a question as it's being read. Where have you seen this before? Now Matthew is narrating events that take place in the life of Jesus for the first time, but Matthew writes and presents them in a way, deliberately intending to make you feel like you've seen this before somewhere. Where do I find events like these? Where do I find events in a pattern like these? Surely this has happened before, but where? Think about that as we hear the word of God read beginning at the first verse of Matthew chapter 14.

Matthew 14:1-36:

1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, 2 and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." 3 For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. 4 For John had been saying to

him, "it is not lawful for you to have her." 5 And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet. 6 But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. 7 Thereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. 8 And having been prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." 9 And although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. 10 And he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. 11 And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother. 12 And his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus. 13 Now when Jesus heard it, He withdrew from there in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. 14 And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick. 15 And when it was evening, the disciples came to Him, saying, "The place is desolate, and the time is already past; so send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!" 17 And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." 18 And He said, "Bring them here to Me." 19 And ordering the multitudes to recline on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave to the multitudes, 20 and they all ate, and were satisfied. And they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. 21 And there were about five thousand men who ate, aside from women and children. 22 And immediately He made the disciples get into the boat, and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. 23 And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. 24 But the boat was already many stadia away from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. 26 And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were frightened, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." 28 And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." 29 And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But seeing the wind, he became afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" 31 And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind stopped. 33 And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!" 34 And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. 35 And

when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent into all that surrounding district and brought to Him all who were sick; 36 and they began to entreat Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were cured.

Here ends the Scripture reading of the evening. Where have we seen this before? It's not too long after Christmas now and I'm just getting to the point where I am putting away my Christmas music. Every year about Thanksgiving time I go back to a closet and begin to pull out the cassette tapes (because some of my Christmas music is pretty old) and then some CD's too. Among the favorites that I bring out is a piece or a CD that contains a lot of different anthems by different composers all around the theme of the Star of Bethlehem. And my favorite one there is a piece by Felix Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn set to music a text from Numbers chapter 24. It is the final of the prophecies that come from a false prophet, Balaam, who on this occasion (as on the previous ones) was guided by the Spirit of God to announce the truth concerning God's great work in the future, and so he spoke of a star that would come out of Jacob and a scepter that would rise out of Israel. And Mendelssohn set that text to music and that's a beautiful piece.

But at the end of it, Mendelssohn, after he has gone through the prophetic section announcing the coming of the Messiah, continues with what you might call "a section of warfare" because that prophecy in Numbers 24 is set in a context where the people of God are facing the armies of Moab. And Moab seeks the destruction of the people of God in the wilderness. That's why they have called for the false prophet, Balaam, that he might come and curse Israel; because up to this time Israel has been living under the blessing of God, and they have been successful in battle, and the fame of the Lord their God has gone out. And thus the king of Moab fears to take his army against this great people because of their great God. And so it is in this setting, with the people of God lined up against their enemies, that Balaam under the Holy Spirit is given prophecy concerning the future: when God's Messiah will arise out of Jacob and He will come against the enemies of the people of God and destroy them that His people might dwell in safety.

And so Mendelssohn gives us a beautiful setting at the beginning with the music rising, picturing, as it were, a star coming up off the horizon and going high up in the sky. And then you begin through this terrible section of warfare with kings being destroyed and the might of God being displayed against. And then you have to come, of course, to what will be the victory and so we must return to a peaceful setting. And when he gets there, he picks up a Lutheran chorale which goes back to Philip Nicolai, but was harmonized by J.S. Bach, and it is probably best known to us from the works of J.S. Bach, "How Brightly Shines the Morning Star." And so what Mendelssohn has done is take this Old Testament text and join it with a setting of a Lutheran chorale that focuses on the book of Revelation where Jesus is identified as "the Morning Star." And by the joining of those two

things he helps us to see that what was being prophesied in Numbers chapter 24 found its fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ. And so by this piece of music he joins together Old and New Testament and shows us that the one was preparing for the other.

“When the Jews looked to the future they saw the past.” These are words from one of my favorite writers on the Gospel according to Matthew, and I've been reading a lot of writers on the Gospel according to Matthew these days. It is equally true that when they look to the past, they see the future. God has a way of letting us know what's coming to pass by taking the image of that which is future and using it as a pattern for what is now past to us, as it were. Or He takes what has been done in times past for us, and He repeats that pattern over and over again so that we will know what the future is going to look like. And because He's doing the same kinds of things over and over and over again, as we look back to the past and see it accomplished, as we see the pattern reproduced in time, God is laying for us a firm ground for our faith to expect that the final and the greatest work upon that same pattern will surely come to pass precisely because He has done it before. And this is the way in which the whole Bible is written, so that the beginning really announces to us what the end will be like; and when we get to the end and see what it finally looks like and what God has done, we can take the light of that and look back and see, “Oh, He's done it before time and time again, in smaller ways perhaps, but ways which bear that same mark of God telling us who He is, what He is all about.” And that is of great help to us because we still live, as it were, in mid-life with the work of salvation. And the whole lot of God's work of salvation that is now past to us in the history of the world...and there is certainly the consummation yet to come: we are not there yet. And so we find ourselves suspended between what is now past and what is yet to come. And how are we to live with hope in these present days? We look back to the past and see what God has done and how He has been faithful to what He promised, and when we see the pattern of His work in the past, we know what the future will be like.

That's why I was asking you, as we read this 14th chapter of Matthew's gospel, to ask yourself, “Where have you seen this before?” Because Matthew wants you to get, what I like to call, “a sense of spiritual *deja vu*.” Any of you ever gone through that feeling of *deja vu*? *Deja vu* is the feeling that something that is now happening for the first time has really happened before. Somehow it seems so familiar and yet you think about it and its, “No, it didn't happen before. This is the very first time it's happening, but there seems to be something so familiar about it.” It's a phenomenon that has been of great interest to certain psychologists. I think there's a spiritual *deja vu*. I think, although these things are just happening now for the first time in the life of Jesus, there is a sense in which they are familiar. We have seen this before. I was already trying to give you hints in the music that you were singing here tonight. We began with “The God of Abraham Praise,” the hymn we sang about Jehovah, the great I Am. We also sang “Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, through the wilderness. Bread of Heaven, Bread of

heaven, feed us till we want no more.” I had no hand in the solo, but the soloist referred to the great I Am as well. God was making sure you were not going to miss this. Matthew chapter 14 gives you the revelation that Jesus is *Yahweh*. He repeats the pattern of *Yahweh*'s work.

Where have you seen the pattern of a wicked king, rising up in opposition to the people of God, and seeking to destroy the Savior? Well, you see it here. Here is Herod. He's already killed John and he's heard that Jesus is now at work, and he suspects that Jesus is none other than John the Baptist raised from the dead. And when Jesus hears that Herod has heard (Because it is not yet time for Jesus to die; it is not yet time for Him to go to Jerusalem.), Jesus withdraws into more hidden territory, outside the reach of the persecuting king. But where have we seen this before?

There was a great Pharaoh, raised up in Egypt that God might display His power in him. And that Pharaoh, too, sought to destroy the work of God in the world. The hand of that Pharaoh, too, was raised up against the Savior of God's people as he sought to kill Moses and Moses fled for his life. And against the background of that persecuting king, there is the movement of the Deliverer Himself out into the wilderness. And that's what we find here as Jesus goes with the five thousand men and their women and children out into the wilderness. Now it is a little harder to pick up here in English translation, but He is going into the wilderness. The disciples say to Him, “This place is desolate,” but what the text says is that “this is a wilderness place.” They have gone out into the wilderness against the backdrop of a persecuting king, and they get into the wilderness, and what do they find? There is no bread to feed this multitude. Just as God has led the people of Israel out of Egypt into a wilderness where there was no bread...and it wasn't as if He had taken a wrong turn and didn't know, He deliberately took them into the wilderness where there was no bread, where there was no water. Why? To show Himself sufficient for every need that would come into their life. Deuteronomy chapter 8 explains to us that God took them where there was no bread so that He might teach them that, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” He fed them with a bread that they did not know, which their fathers did not know, in order that they might know that, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” God has deliberately taken His people into the wilderness, beyond the ability of their own resources, beyond that which they could even find in the wilderness to feed themselves. He took them to a place where their most basic needs in life were placed in jeopardy, and not because He intended to kill them in the wilderness, but because He intended to show Himself sufficient for all their needs, and so He gave them bread in the wilderness.

So it is now that Jesus goes into the wilderness with the multitudes following Him, and the disciples want the multitude sent back home because the hour is late and the people are hungry and Jesus said, “They do not need to go away.

You give them something to eat.” They said, “We have but five loaves and two fishes.” And Jesus says, “Bring them to Me.” And in the miracle of His multiplication, Jesus feeds the multitude of 5,000 men, besides the women and children.

Seems like an odd way to estimate a crowd, doesn't it? You know, it's just the way that Moses estimated crowds: “600,000 men who could bear arms, besides the woman and children.” Matthew is trying to give you that spiritual sense of *deja vu*. He repeats language and idiom so that you might get this sense, “I've seen this before. Who is this who breaks bread in the wilderness?” And after they have been fed in the wilderness, trouble arises on the sea. Just as when Israel had come out of Egypt and moved a ways into the wilderness, they found themselves pinned against the sea with the persecuting king now bearing down upon them, Pharaoh and his chariots. And God showed Himself on that occasion to be the Lord of the sea. By the blast of His nostrils the sea was parted and the dry ground was made to appear, just as if the world were being created all over again. For when God had first made the world, it dwelt in a watery mass and God's command had to bring forth from the water, separating waters from the waters, dry land upon which man might live. And so it was that Israel was being pushed into the sea by the army of Egypt, but God by the blast of His nostrils makes the dry ground to appear and His people inherit the land, the dry land, and they go across and make their way while the watery chaos swallows up the enemies of God. And a new creation has been modeled for us.

Exodus 15 is a great oratorio, I guess we could call it, “the song of Moses,” written to commemorate all that had taken place. And God's great work at the sea was intended to be a reminder to Israel of His faithfulness to His covenant promise. When you get to Psalm 77, it looks back upon that great event and it speaks of God whose way was in the sea, whose path was on the waves.

When the prophet Isaiah looks to the future and he sees the coming work of God and the day when there will now be a greater exodus modeled on the past, He too looks to a God who is able to make a way in the sea. In the 43rd chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah we read these words, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you.” And again then, looking to the later portion of the chapter, he also speaks, in verse 16, “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way through the sea and a path through the mighty waters, who brings forth the chariot and the horse, the army and the mighty man (They will lie down together and not rise again; they have been quenched and extinguished like a wick): Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past. Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it? I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.” The future is to be like the past. The God who ruled the waves and the sea, at the Red Sea, and divided it up, ruling over it that His people might be delivered, is the God who one day, Isaiah says, He will do the same. He will have a new exodus, bringing His people out, leading them through

the wilderness. And His path will be in the Sea; He will walk upon the waves.

The book of Job chapter 9, as he reflects upon the greatness of God, we read in the eighth verse a description of God as “One who alone stretches out the heavens, and tramples down the waves of the sea.” The Old Testament, as you know, was translated into Greek. And it was actually in its Greek translation that it is best known to the people of the New Testament. The New Testament writers write in Greek, not in Hebrew. And not just because they’re writing for the whole Hellenistic world, it’s even for that first early Jewish church that is now scattered abroad in the land of Palestine and beyond. They too are familiar with the Greek language and much of their Bible is known to them through the Septuagint, as it was called, kind of the NIV of its day, I suppose, written to the people in the language that they spoke. Job 9:8 is translated in Greek as “God who walks upon the waves,” *not* “tramples the sea,” but “*who walks upon the waves.*”

And so it is in Matthew chapter 14 against the backdrop of a persecuting king, who would if he could, kill the Lord Jesus Christ just as He had killed John, we see our Lord Jesus Christ moving out and leading His people forward through the wilderness. And now He is walking on the water while they are in jeopardy. As he comes to that, they see Him and do not recognize Him. They think He is a ghost and we could well excuse them. What would you have thought? There you are in the sea; the winds are blowing; the waves are high; the ship is being tossed; and then it seems there is a figure on the water. You wipe your eyes; you look again. You think that in the darkness of the night you can't believe what you are seeing, so you rub your eyes again, but as you do the figure is coming closer and closer and walking, and somebody finally says, “It is a ghost.” But Jesus speaks to them and He says, “Take courage,” or “Be of good cheer. It is I. Do not be afraid.”

The words seems so commonplace to us and they certainly are appropriate to the context. Jesus is saying, “It is I.” We expect that they will recognize the sound of His voice. It tells them not be afraid, a very frequent thing that God uses when He encounters His people, because oftentimes the approach of God's presence strikes fear into our hearts. But He tells them, “Do not be afraid,” but His proclamation that “It is I” carries a whole lot more weight than we realize in our English. Perhaps we’ll get a feel for it if we move into the eighth chapter of John's gospel where Jesus has been engaged in a great controversy with the Pharisees in just who Jesus is is at the center of all of that. And Jesus finally makes a comment that pushes them over the edge. When He does, they pick up stones to kill Him. He says, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Now why did it push them over the edge? Why did they pick up stones? It's not because they thought He was simply deranged. They regarded it as blasphemy because when He says, “I am,” they recognize immediately that He is identifying Himself with the great I AM. It was by that that God had identified Himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14 when Moses sought an identification of the One with whom he spoke in the burning bush. God said, “I am that I am.” And in the Greek Bible that came out “*Ego eimi,*” in the first part of that sentence. And that's what Jesus is saying in John 8,

“*Ego emi*,’ “I am.” And so they recognize in this man not a simple deranged nut but a blasphemer who claims to be Yahweh Himself, and so they would stone Him according to the Mosaic law. It is that same phrase that Jesus uses here, “*Ego eimi*.” And if we go back into the prophecy of Isaiah, we see it there too. Isaiah chapter 41, in a whole section of Isaiah that is devoted to repeated explanation of who is Yahweh, as time and again He simply declares, “I am Yahweh,” and then He unfolds His work. Isaiah 41:4, “Who has performed and accomplished it, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, Yahweh, am the first, and with the last. I am He” (“*Ego eimi*” in the Greek). And in that 43rd chapter of Isaiah where we looked at the image of God as the One who ruled over the sea, there in the tenth verse of that chapter, “‘You are My witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘And My servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He (*Ego eimi*). Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me. I, even I, am Yahweh; and there is no savior besides Me.’”

Now this is an awful lot of detail here. You’re probably wondering where does all this go? Well, my friends, here’s where it goes. The miracles that we see here performed in Matthew chapter 14 are not “one off” examples of the power of God to prove what He can do. These are works that are set in the pattern of the work of salvation, which not only proved that God is at work but assure us that the work of God is ongoing for the salvation of His people, to give them their bread in the wilderness and to deliver them against the waves of the sea. He is the God who comes to us when we are on the sea and when we are in the wilderness. Why?! Because He is Yahweh! That’s who He is and this is what He is about: coming to His people in the time of need, showing Himself to be sufficient for every wave of the sea that you must face and every day in the wilderness when you must march.

He does not take us into the wilderness to destroy us as Israel claimed that He did when they fell into unbelief. He takes us into the wilderness only to draw us closer to Himself and to reveal to us the fullness of His power and the steadfastness of His love; for He is Yahweh, the God who first saved us from Egypt, made us His own at Sinai, and gave us the promise of everlasting inheritance. As He comes into the world in the Lord Jesus Christ, He is still about the same work, and Matthew is building that theme throughout the whole of His gospel from his very first words. He opens His gospel saying, ‘*βίβλος γενέσεως*,’ “The book of genesis of Jesus Christ,” taking us back to the beginning and then marching us through the pattern of God’s work from Abraham down through David—saving them from the exile, restoring them, and at last bringing the Christ into the world. And time and again he is giving us that sense of spiritual *deja vu* that we might recognize in Jesus the God of the Exodus, because He has come to do what Isaiah promised: the greater exodus and the final deliverance that He might bring His people into that everlasting rest.

And so it means that if you can see Him as that God, then with Peter you can say

to Him, "Lord, if it is You, then bid me to come and to walk upon the waters." Because sometimes we are in life's threatening circumstances, when it seems there is none who can deliver. But, my friends, if it is He, and if He is Yahweh, He can bid us to come and walk upon the waters. Well, that's what Isaiah has promised, isn't it? "When you pass through the waters, they will not overflow you." Why? "For I am with you and I am Yahweh." 'When you are in the wilderness and you are without bread, you will not starve, for I am Yahweh and I am with you.' And when your boat is tossed by the waves and the winds are contrary, He comes to you for He is Yahweh and He can save you. When He got into the boat, they arrived at the other side; and when word was out that He was there, they brought to Him all their sick and He healed them. His healings are but the first fruits of the final harvest. He will bring healing into the life of every Christian, whether here now or in the last, but His promise is to wipe away every tear from your eyes.

Most of us will live perhaps like Paul, with thorns in the flesh in this life, and from time to time will experience those great workings of God in answer to prayer that we might know that He is near and be assured of His love and care for us. But until the final victory of death is won, we live in a world where as Jesus said, we do have tribulation. "But take courage," He says, "I have overcome the world." 'I can give bread in the wilderness. I rule the waves of the sea, for I am Yahweh. Before me not, God was formed. After Me, there will be none. I am the first and I am the last.' And this God is your God. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.

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