“Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult,

 of our life's wild, restless sea.”

Cecil Frances Alexander wrote the lyrics of this hymn

 at least eighteen hundred years

 after the events of today's gospel story.

It certainly seems like Alexander

 intentionally included elements of today's gospel account in the hymn

 and the tune ***is*** set to a tune named “Galilee.”

In Matthew,

 Jesus has finished speaking to large crowds,

 both by the sea of Galilee

 and in the synagogue at Nazareth.

He keeps trying to get away from the crowds

 for some time by himself,

 but the crowds keep hunting him down.

Jesus has fed thousands

 with just a bit of fish and bread;

 he has preached and preached to them

 and he is exhausted.

So Jesus sends the full-bellied crowds away

 and makes – the Greek says *forces –*

the disciples to get in a boat

 and head for the other side of the lake,

 without him in it.

Finally, Jesus has some down time

 and climbs up a mountain

 to pray to his Father.

Scripture gives us many instances

 in which the divine is found on the mountaintop,

 and so it is with Jesus.

Sometime in the early morning,

 while it is still dark,

 Jesus descends the mountain

 to find his disciples being thrown to and fro

 in their boat,

 battered by the wind and waves.

It's not likely that the men have gotten much rest

 during the stormy night

 and they are weary.

Things don't get any better

 when they see Jesus emerge from the darkness

 walking on top of the water.

The disciples think they are seeing a ghost

 or some kind of phantom sea-creature!

It's interesting that Matthew

 doesn't mention the disciples being frightened

 until they see Jesus

 coming toward them on the water.

Maybe they are used to storms coming up suddenly

 and have decided to ride this one out.

What they have *never* seen

 is a man walking on top of the waves

 and they are terrified.

Jesus calms his followers,

“Take heart, it is I,

 do not be afraid.”

A more literal translation would be:

 “Take heart, I AM, do not be afraid.”

We don't know if the disciples understand

 what Jesus is saying at that moment,

 but Matthew intends for us to get it.

When Jesus says, “I AM,”

 he is connecting himself

 with the God of the Old Testament,

 whose name, YAHWEH,

 was considered too sacred to speak,

 but could be translated “I AM.”

“I AM,” as in I have always been

 and will always be.

The name is a promise

 and a declaration of love

 for all people.

“Don”t be afraid,”

 Jesus tells his disciples.

“Just as the God of Israel is,

 I am.

I am the Son of God.

I am the one sent to save you from your sins.

I am the one with power over heaven and earth.

I am the rock to whom you cling

 in times of doubt and trouble.”

Which brings us to Peter,

 the one whom Jesus calls “the Rock.”

Peter is never content

 with what Jesus has to say.

Peter is always trying

 to figure out they mystery of Jesus,

 always trying to test the limits of Jesus' patience.

If Jesus can walk on water,

 Peter thinks,

 then he should be able

 to make Peter walk on water, too.

Peter is a bit of a showman.

So he looks at the water-walking Jesus

 and treats him like the attendant

 at a water park attraction.

Peter wants to do what Jesus is doing,

 so he jumps off the side of the boat and starts walking. We wonder what that must be like,

 to be able to walk on water just like Jesus.

It must be scary but really exciting.

But Peter's excitement is short-lived.

He is, after all, a rock,

 and rocks always end up at the bottom of the sea.

Peter's fear of the wind

 and his realization that he is merely human

 catch up with him,

 and he starts to sink

 before he feels the hand of Jesus

 pull him from certain death.

“Wow,” the disciples in the boat cry out.

“You really are the Son of God!”

This is where Peter and the other disciples,

 where we discover

 that this story is not about Peter

 or the other disciples.

It's not about us.

It's about him.

The story is about Jesus.

 It is about a savior

 who will find us in our shaking boats,

 in all the dark places where we despair,

 in all the waiting rooms and gravesides

 and dark rooms where we cannot sleep.

The story is about how Jesus will do

 whatever he has to do

 to find and comfort us,

 to ease our fears and plant hope in our hearts.

“Take heart, I AM, do not be afraid.”

Jesus calls us – you and me –

 o'er the tumult of life's wild, restless sea.

Like Peter and the others,

 we experience Jesus most profoundly

 not before or after a time of tumult in our lives,

 but right in the middle of it.

When we feel most hopeless and helpless,

 Jesus joins us in the wind and the waves,

 comes to us

 when we are being slammed

 into the sides of our little boats,

 climbs right in there with us

 to reassure us we are not alone.

“Take heart,”

 Jesus tells us.

The root of the word “heart”

 is the same as the root of the word “courage.”

When Jesus tells us to take heart,

 he is telling us to have courage,

 courage that begins in the heart

 and spreads to permeate our whole being. This is light years away

 from bravado or false bravery.

You and I don't have to pretend we are not frightened

 when we are.

This world in which we live

 is a profoundly frightening place.

As we bob along in our tiny boats,

 we are all too aware

 of the phantoms seeking to devour us.

Some of us get respite from that fear

 before something happens

 to make it return.

Some of us, unfortunately,

 never catch that break.

 But it is in the tumult

 that Jesus encounters us,

 urges us to have courage born in the heart

 and helps us bear the fears

 that threaten to sink us.

“Jesus calls us; o'er the tumult

 of our life's wild, restless sea,

 day by day his clear voice sounding,

 saying: 'Christian, folow me.'”

Gently, ever so gently,

 Jesus calls us to follow him.

When Jesus joins us on the water,

 he calls us to return

 to where we started our journey.

Martin Luther would call that a return to our baptism,

 for it is water

 that we are first are encountered by Jesus,

 where we first hear the “I AM” of Jesus

 uttered over us,

 where we receive the promise

 that Jesus will never leave us,

 no matter what lies ahead.

Luther was never one to say , “I was baptized,”

 but “I AM baptized,”

 for he realized that he was connected forever

 to the great I AM

 in the water that washed him clean

 and kept on washing him his entire life.

“Take heart,

 you baptized ones,”

 Jesus tells us.

“Have courage that comes from my love

 which lives there, deep within you.

Have courage when evil is all around you.

Have courage when people think you strange,

 or worse, irrelevant,

 because you follow me.

Have the courage to reach out to others with my love,

 even when the sea is rocking your boat

 and you are frightened.

Have the courage to live your life fully, boldly

 because I am with you

 and will never leave you.

Take heart.

Live out of your heart,

 which beats in time with mine.

Live in truth and faith,

 showing others, through your life,

 a glimpse of my goodness and grace.”

Take heart.

Be courageous.

Do not be afraid.

Jesus gives us everything we need to follow him,

 to make an offering to him of our lives.

But Jesus does not expect us to go it alone.

He gives us one another,

 for when times are easy

 and for when the seas are rough.

He gives his very life for us,

 rising in our hearts where he lives forever,

 in our joys and sorrows,

 gently and firmly calling

 to love and serve him all our days.

Truly this is the Son of God!

*Pentecost 10A*

*August 13, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 14:22-33*