“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*