SERMON · MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ AREA

Saved in the Storm: The Hand, the Boat, and the Table

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost · August 9, 2026
Readings: 1 Kings 19:9–18 · Psalm 85:8–13 · Romans 10:5–15 · Matthew 14:22–33

Preached by Dr. Thomas Lucking, PhD, LMFT thomaslucking.com

Introduction: The Storm and the Weight of Being Human

There is a profound, almost terrifying reality about being human: we are incredibly fragile. The author and psychologist Jordan Peterson often writes about the inherent vulnerability of human existence. He points out that to be human is to be perpetually exposed—to illness, to grief, to sudden financial loss, to the slow wear-and-tear of anxiety, and ultimately, to our own mortality. We are conscious of our limits, yet we are required to walk through a world that can turn turbulent in an instant. We are, by our very nature, needy creatures.

And nowhere is that human frailty laid barer than in our Gospel reading today.

It is 3:00 in the morning. The disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee, battered by waves, rowing furiously against a headwind. They are exhausted, strained to their absolute limit, isolated in the dark.

And then, through the mist, Jesus comes to them, walking on the water.

Peter—impulsive, bold, deeply human Peter—sees Jesus and calls out: *"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."* Jesus says, *"Come."*

So Peter steps out of the boat. For a second, a miraculous second, he walks. But then he looks away from Jesus. He notices the sheer force of the wind. He feels his own frailty. He remembers that human bodies do not stand on water. And the moment he measures the storm against his own strength, he begins to sink.

He doesn't offer a sophisticated theological prayer. He doesn't recite a creed. He screams three words of pure, unadulterated human panic: **"Lord, save me!"**

Part 1: The Trap of "Doing" and the Misunderstanding of Righteousness

If you have grown up in the modern world, or even in certain corners of the church, you have been taught a very specific lesson about stories like this. The moralistic lesson goes like this: *"If you just have enough faith, you can walk on water. If you just focus hard enough on Jesus, you won't sink in the storms of life."*

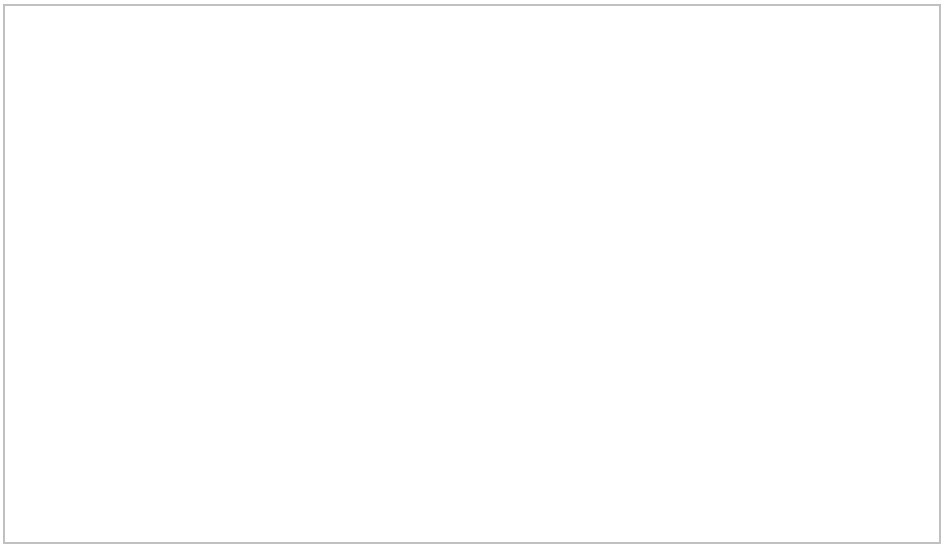
That sounds inspiring, doesn't it? But it is a trap.

If Matthew 14 is a sermon about how *you* need to generate stronger faith so *you* can walk on water, then I have handed you an oar while you are drowning. If faith is something *we* manufacture—a spiritual muscle we flex to keep ourselves afloat—then when the diagnosis comes, when the marriage falls apart, or when depression rolls in like a thick fog, our sinking is entirely our own fault. "If only I had more faith," we tell ourselves.

When we think this way, we have misunderstood the word at the very center of our faith: **Righteousness.**

We often hear the word "righteousness" and think it means moral perfection, self-righteousness, or having a high moral score. But in the Scriptures, righteousness isn't a moral performance; **it is a relationship.** It means being in *right standing* with someone.

Martin Luther realized that as Christians, we live across two completely different axes of righteousness: the **Vertical** and the **Horizontal**.



The Vertical Axis (*Coram Deo* — Before God): In relation to God, our righteousness is entirely **PASSIVE.** You do nothing. You render nothing to God. You cannot buy it, earn it, or build it. You simply receive what Christ has done for you.

The Horizontal Axis (*Coram Mundo* — Before the World): In relation to our neighbor, our righteousness is **ACTIVE.** This is where we work, serve, love, fight for justice, and care for the vulnerable.

Our human temptation is always to mix up the axes! We try to use our horizontal good works to impress God vertically. But Luther famously shattered that illusion when he wrote: "**God does not need your good works. But your neighbor does.**"

Vertically, before God, you are Peter sinking in the waves. You have zero active righteousness to offer. You are entirely dependent on a hand reaching down into the water to catch you.

Part 2: Admitting Powerlessness — Church and the 12 Steps

This brings us to a remarkable overlap between our Lutheran theology and one of the most transformative movements of the modern era: the 12-Step recovery movement.

A 12-Step meeting and the Christian Church begin in the exact same place.

Step 1 of AA states: *"We admitted we were powerless over our addiction—that our lives had become unmanageable."*

That is pure Law. That is the moment Peter feels the cold water hitting his chest and realizes, "I cannot swim my way out of this." Before anyone can experience real healing, they have to abandon the lie of self-sufficiency. They have to stop pretending they can handle it on their own.

In a culture that demands you pull yourself up by your spiritual bootstraps, coming to church on a Sunday morning is an act of radical surrender. We don't gather here to demonstrate how well we've managed our lives this week. We gather here like people walking into a recovery meeting—admitting that we are frail, that we are needy, and that left to our own willpower, we sink.

Part 3: The Difference — From a Higher Power to a Pierced Hand

Now, while the Church and a 12-Step group start in the same place—with human powerlessness—this is where the Gospel takes us somewhere uniquely beautiful.

A support group, by necessity, speaks of a "Higher Power as we understood Him." It must keep that horizon broad. But as the Church, we do not leave you today with a vague, distant, cosmic force.

We point you to a specific Person: Jesus Christ.

Look at what happens in the text. When Peter cries out, *"Lord, save me!"*, what does Jesus do?

He doesn't stand on the water and shout a lecture on navigational safety. He doesn't say, "Well, Peter, if you had just kept your eyes on me, this wouldn't have happened." He doesn't demand a pledge of allegiance before acting.

Matthew writes: "**Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.**"

Before Peter can even finish sinking, Christ's hand is around his wrist. That is *Sola Gratia*—Grace Alone. Christ acts alone to save the drowning man.

Our God is not an abstract energy. Our God is the One who stepped into the chaos of human history, took on fragile human skin, felt the cold wind, walked into our storms, and stretched out His arms on a cross so that no depth could ever separate us from His love.

Part 4: You Are Not on a Solo Jet Ski — Salvation is Communal

Notice what happens next in the story, because this is crucial.

Jesus grabs Peter, calms the wind, and where do they go? **They get back into the boat.**

Peter was not out on a solo jet-ski trip! Salvation is not a private, individualistic "me and my personal decision for Jesus" contract. Peter was part of a community. The boat—what the ancient church fathers always called the *Navis*, the ship of the Church—holds the rest of the disciples.

When Christ saves you, He doesn't leave you tread water by yourself in the middle of the ocean. He places you back in the boat with a bunch of other frail, messy, sinking sinners who are all learning to trust Him together.

And this brings us right back to that 12th Step in recovery, and to Luther's horizontal righteousness!

Step 12 says that having had a spiritual awakening, we try to carry this message to others. Why? Because once you know what it feels like to be caught by the hand of Christ, you can finally look around the boat.

You don't care for the person on the margins to earn your spot in the boat—you are *already* in the boat! You don't feed the hungry or sit with the grieving to get God to love you—God *already* grabbed you out of the sea!

Because your vertical relationship is 100% secured by grace, your hands are completely freed up to reach out horizontally. As Luther wrote in *On the Freedom of a Christian*:

> *"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.*
> *A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."*

You are freed from having to save yourself, which means you are now free to love your neighbor simply because they need your love.

Part 5: The Sacrament — Food for the Frail

So how do we receive this grace today? How does this Christ reach into our storm right now, in this room, on an ordinary Sunday?

He does it at this Table.

In the 12-Step meeting, you hear powerful human words. But in the Church, God gives us **Sacraments**—physical matter infused with Divine promises.

If you want to see passive righteousness in its purest, most tangible form, look at the Holy Communion.

You do not row your way to the altar. You do not bring a portfolio of your moral achievements to present to the Pastor. You walk up to this rail with empty, trembling hands. You don't even have to feed yourself—the bread is placed into your palm. The cup is held to your lips.

The Eucharist is not a reward for strong, disciplined Christians who have their lives together. As Luther wrote in the Large Catechism, **Holy Communion is medicine for the weak, food for drowning beggars.**

In a world that demands you perform, produce, and prove your worth, Jesus meets you in your utter frailty. He doesn't give you a 5-step self-help manual. He gives you Himself. He hands you His very body and blood under bread and wine, saying: *"Given for you. Shed for you. Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."*

Conclusion

Whatever storm you brought into this sanctuary today—whether it is the quiet storm of loneliness, the roaring storm of a life crisis, or simply the exhausting weight of being a fragile human being in a broken world—hear this Good News:

Salvation has never depended on the strength of your grip on Jesus. It has always, from beginning to end, depended on the strength of Jesus' grip on you.

You do not need to walk on water today. You are allowed to be tired. You are permitted to admit that you are sinking.

Because when you cry out, *"Lord, save me!"*, the hand that holds the universe is already reaching into the deep to catch you, pull you into the boat, and feed you at His table.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Dr. Thomas Lucking, PhD, LMFT is a psychotherapist and coach who preaches at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in the Santa Cruz area. More sermons and information about Christian counseling: **thomaslucking.com/sermons**

© 2026 Dr. Thomas Lucking. You are welcome to share this sermon for non-commercial use with attribution.