

"Don't Play God"

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from our Savior God – the God who has our lives well in hand, every moment of every day. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Like so many other things in life, too much of even a good thing can ruin all. Warning stickers come to mind. So many of them are just so silly and pointless that we tend to dismiss all of them. Is there really a pressing need to place a warning on a child's Superman costume that *"this cape does not make the wearer stronger and does not enable the wearer to fly"*? Is it really necessary to warn the consumer that the contents of a propane bottle are flammable, or that a frozen dinner *"may be hot when heated"*? Some warnings are just self-evident. Some lady in Walmart asked me why I wasn't standing directly on the X while waiting in the checkout line. This despite the fact that she was old enough to have seen plenty of Roadrunner cartoons.

Another curious thing about warnings is that a significant number are obviously designed to protect the one issuing the warning, not the one to whom the warning is issued. This is true not only of companies trying to prevent lawsuits, it applies also to parents. A significant number of parent-to-children warnings are more for the sake of the parent than they are for the children. Parents just feel much more comfortable and confident if they send their children off with a *"Be careful"* or *"Drive safely."*

This morning the theme of our sermon seems like one of those ridiculously obvious warnings that really doesn't need to be articulated. My prayer is that God would not allow anyone to leave here this morning without a greater appreciation for just how much and how often we need to be reminded of what at first might seem painfully evident: *"Don't Play God."*

The text that will guide us in our study is found in the 14th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

ESV Matthew 14:22-33 *Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch*

of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." ²⁸ ¶ And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

These are the verbally inspired words of our God. Far from silly or ridiculous, these are the very words of life eternal, and by them we seek to be refreshed, refocused, strengthened, and comforted. That our God would grant us such great gifts this morning through the study of these words, so we pray, ***"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."*** Amen.

I have little doubt that a discussion about who is and who is not God might initially strike many of you as just about as obvious as a warning I once read *"not to place lighted fireworks in mouth."* In fact the danger here is that you may have found yourself ready to dismiss any explanation that might follow. Yet understand that while much in this life is silly, this most certainly is not.

By way of explanation, we first join the disciples in their storm-tossed boat on the Sea of Galilee at the point where they believe they have just seen a ghost. To be fair to the disciples, the word translated ***"ghost"*** can also mean *"apparition."* In other words, they were frightened by something that they saw but could not explain. Imagine yourself in their position. It is very dark, you are in the middle of a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee, and suddenly you see... what? A silhouette, a human form, something moving across the water toward your imperiled boat. I'm pretty sure that you and I would have also found that more than just a little disconcerting.

But set that aside for now and ask yourself what, exactly, do you suppose had been occupying the thoughts of the disciples just before Jesus arrived. One would assume prayers for deliverance would certainly be playing the lead role. I can't imagine that these *men of God* would not have been passionately petitioning their God in such an hour

of obvious need. How could they *not* have been thinking specifically about Jesus at a time like that – the same Jesus who had only hours before offered a demonstration of his power by his miraculous feeding of the five thousand? My guess is that they were, one and all, yearning for the comforting, powerful presence of their Lord. And yet they are shocked and terrified when Jesus actually arrived on the scene – albeit in rather unconventional fashion.

This leads us to the first question raised by our text: *What are human beings actually asking for when we pray for deliverance from our God in the hour of peril or extreme need? Are we really asking for God's help, or are we just making ourselves feel a bit better about our own chances – our own abilities to weather the storm (so to speak) by invoking the Lord?* Interesting question. Telling question - especially if we ever find ourselves *surprised* by God's divine rescue. I have heard more than one person express both joy and surprise that *"My prayers actually worked!"*

I am not God. You are not God. Yet more times than we care to admit we find that we trust more in ourselves for solutions than we trust in God's divine rescue. Maybe the warning *"Don't Play God"* isn't so pointless after all.

The next striking aspect of our text is, of course, the fact that Peter had such trust in his Lord that he too was able to walk on water. It is grossly unfair that so many ignore the fact that Peter had the faith to walk on water, but are quick to condemn him for his demonstration of doubt. Who here has ever demonstrated such faith and trust? Note that Peter would not attempt such a thing unless and until he was told by his Savior to do so. This is evidence of Peter's absolute trust in his Lord. The clear message is that Peter fully believed that the command of his Lord carried with it the power to carry out that command.

So what went wrong with Peter? How or why did he fail, after succeeding so spectacularly? We know that he began to sink when he looked around and saw the power and danger of the raging storm, but what was the real source of his doubt? It was in himself, wasn't it? It doesn't appear that he doubted his Lord. He began to doubt his own abilities. We have evidence that this was the case given the fact that, when sinking, Peter called out to *his Lord* for rescue: **"Lord, save me!"** It was the perfect thing to do, wasn't it? Hard to argue that it wasn't, given the fact that it worked. The power was God's, not Peter's. Peter acknowledged as much by calling upon his Lord for help and rescue. You know the final result: **"Immediately Jesus reached out His hand and took hold of him."**

We should give Peter high marks in all of this. Not only did his faith allow him to do something that we would never even attempt, he also demonstrated a perfect trust in his Lord as the only reliable source of rescue when things started to go wrong.

Yet Jesus didn't exactly give him high marks, did he? In fact he called him a *"Little Faith."* Where does that leave you and me? Again, I could never imagine myself having the strength of faith to walk on water, yet Peter did. And still Jesus labeled his faith as small, and chastised him for doubting. Makes me wonder just what Jesus would say to me, today, here and now. If Peter was a *"Little Faith,"* what does that make me? I suspect everyone here would find themselves in the same boat.

What all of this teaches us, once again, is how great is the gap between us and our God – and therefore just how foolish for any human being to "play God." It teaches us not only how far we are from the faith-filled Christian that we are supposed to be, but just how far above and beyond us is our Savior-God. Jesus *never* doubted, *never* lost faith or confidence, *never* slipped up or fell. It makes us appreciate all the more just how incredibly difficult our rescue really was. Time after time the mountainous waves of despair rose up to threaten Jesus, but he never wavered. How many times did the dread of what lay ahead seek to intimidate Jesus into apprehension or hopelessness or compromise? Yet not once did he allow it to overwhelm him. Never once did his faith or trust waver.

Had he done so, you and I would have been lost eternally. Had he slipped up, just once, all would have been lost, all would have been condemned. The sum total of all of the cunning and fury of hell charged maniacally again and again and again into this man, only to be defeated every single time. It was that perfect, flawless record that Jesus offered to God the Father as the only adequate payment for our sins. God the Father accepted it for one reason and one reason only: it was absolutely perfect in every way. No flaws, no failures, no deficiencies. Perfection was the only thing that could earn our pardon.

This represents the greatest reason we need to be reminded not to play God: *we could never have paid the bill.* We could never produce anything perfect enough to offer as a sin payment to a holy and just God. Sinners have no such currency, no such bargaining power. We know that we are not God if for no other reason than that it took God to produce what we could not – the payment great enough to pay for *my* sin, and thereby save *me.*

There remain, however, countless areas of life where we also need to be reminded not only to not play God, but to let God be God. We not only "play God" in the sense of imagining that we have more power and ability than we do, we "play God" whenever we try to manipulate or bargain with him ("*I will do this, Lord, if you will do that.*") When you lie awake into the wee hours of the night, filled with anxiety about one thing or another, remind yourself who is and who is not God. When you are fretting about the safe return of your beloved children after a night out with friends, be reminded that you are not God. You cannot preserve your loved ones by worry and anxiety, but God can. And more than that, God *does*. Carry the matter to God and let him be who and what he is. When financial needs seem overwhelming, who then is God in your life? Do you trust God and his promise to supply what you need *when you seek first his kingdom*, or do you, by default, take such challenges upon your own highly incapable shoulders? Marriage and other relationship issues? Child rearing? Business challenges? The threat of sickness? Who do you really turn to for such needs?

And those are just secular things. What about your struggles against those sins that seem to be so frustratingly successful in your life? Are you yourself the god from whom you seek strength to overcome them, or do you reach out like Peter and cry, simply, "**Lord, save me!**"

As Americans (especially out here on the prairie) we have a strong history of hard work and self-sufficiency. God surely *does* expect us to work hard and to enjoy the labors of our own hands. Yet the temptation is always there to forget who really provides all that we have, who it is that maintains our health, who protects and defends us every moment of our lives until he decides to call us home, and who it is that has rescued us from the unspeakably horrible misery of hell.

What a tremendous comfort this is intended to be. How foolish *not* to take full advantage of this truth. Not only *can't* you take responsibility for those things that God alone controls, God makes it clear that he is well-pleased when his children take his advice to "**be still, and know that he is God.**" When the storm clouds of your life gather and threaten – as they surely will in a world as sinful and perverse as ours – then look up and recognize the powerful, capable, glorious presence of your God. Hear him speak to you as he did to the disciples in our text: "**Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.**" The God who sacrificed his own Son will never, could never, let you down. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Job 38:4-18** "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵ Who determined its measurements--surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶ On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, ⁷ when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? ⁸ "Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, ⁹ when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, ¹⁰ and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, ¹¹ and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed'? ¹² "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, ¹³ that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? ¹⁴ It is changed like clay under the seal, and its features stand out like a garment. ¹⁵ From the wicked their light is withheld, and their uplifted arm is broken. ¹⁶ "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? ¹⁷ Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? ¹⁸ Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this.

^{ESV} **Romans 10:5-13** For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ or "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The 10th Sunday after Pentecost – August 9, 2020

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 767 (Brown Hymnal)

"Church of God, Elect and Glorious"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Job 38:4-18) From time to time man needs to be reminded of his place, especially in relation to his God. We find it very easy to fall into an arrogant, silly mindset whereby we imagine that there is some sort of parity or equality between God and man – as though we can bargain with God. Our first lesson disabuses us of any such notion.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 118 (Page 29) (Brown Hymnal)

The New Testament Lesson: (Romans 10:5-13) Our New Testament lesson gives an example of just why it is a good thing for us that our God is not on our level. The solution that God established to rescue fallen mankind was nothing like what man would have devised, for who would have even considered condemning God's only, beloved, innocent Son for the sins of others? Such is God's love for rebellious mankind and his unique and amazing plan for our rescue and salvation.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 250 (Verses 1, 3-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Holy God We Praise Thy Name"

The Sermon – Text: Matthew 14:22-33 (Printed on the back page)

"Don't Play God"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 305 (Stanzas 1&3) (Red Hymnal)

"Soul, Adorn Thyself with Gladness"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 655 (Red Hymnal)

"I Pray Thee Dear Lord Jesus"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!
To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (29) Average (35)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-11:20 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting

CLC News – Redeemer of Bowdle and Zion of Ipswich have called Pastor Ben Libby. Pastor Emeritus Bob List has asked to be relieved of his vacancy pastor duties at Trinity of Spokane. Pastor Wayne Eichstadt has accepted their call to serve them in that capacity. Living Savior of Eden Prairie has called Pastor Luke Bernthal.

2021 Trip to Israel – Despite the current COVID-19 related challenges, the CLC trip to Israel is still on schedule for January 13-22, 2021. More information is available online at <https://tinyurl.com/IsraelTrip2021> or from the tour sponsor, Pastor Nathanael Mayhew (404-729-4602 or nmayhew@sleepyeyelutheran.com).

Maintenance Position at ILC – Immanuel Lutheran College is soliciting applications for an on-campus maintenance position. See Pastor Roehl for more information, or contact ILC incoming President Daniel Schierenbeck dan.schierenbeck@ilc.edu. Deadline is August 15, 2020.

Congratulations! – Congratulations to Timothy and Hope Meyer, who were married on Saturday in New Ulm. May the Lord richly bless both Timothy and Hope as they begin their lives together as husband and wife.

Church Council Meeting – next Sunday during the fellowship hour.