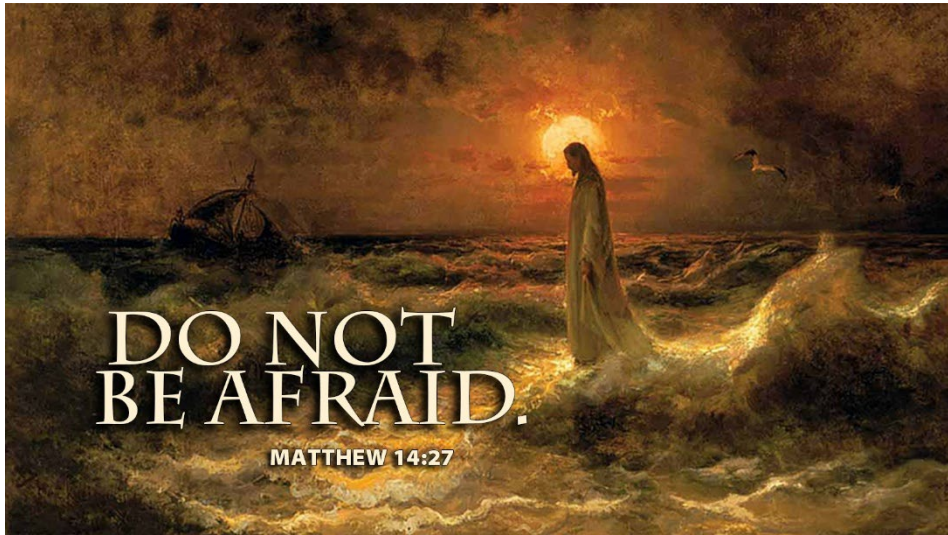


The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 9, 2026
9:30 a.m. Worship



"Be and Make Disciples of Jesus Christ"

Grace Lutheran Church

111 Lutheran Drive, P.O. Box 86, Eaton, Ohio 45320

937.456.6258

Email: GraceEaton111@gmail.com

Website: www.gracelutheranofeaton.com

Pastor Dwight Hanson

WELCOME TO WORSHIP!

P - Presiding Minister

A - Assisting minister

C - Congregation

* - Please Stand

Please silence electronic devices.

PRELUDE

WELCOME & ANNOUNCEMENTS

***CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS:**

P In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

C **Amen.**

P Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid:

C **Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

P Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

Please kneel or sit as you are able.

P Most merciful God,

C **we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.**

P Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

C **Amen.**

***SHARING OF GOD'S PEACE:**

P The peace of the Lord be with you always.

C **And also with you.**

***GATHERING HYMN:** *“Precious Lord, Take My Hand” (WOV 731)*

***GREETING:**

P The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

C **And also with you.**

***KYRIE:**



A In peace, let us pray to the Lord. **C** Lord, have mer - cy.



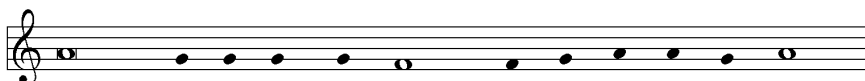
A For the peace from a- bove, and for our sal- vation, let us pray to the Lord.



C Lord, have mer - cy.



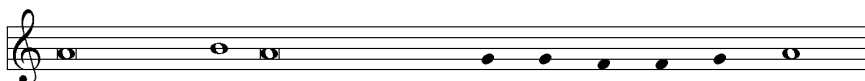
A For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God,



and for the u - ni - ty of all, let us pray to the Lord.



C Lord, have mer - cy.



A For this holy house, and for all who offer here their wor - ship and praise,



let us pray to the Lord. **C** Lord, have mer - cy.



A Help, save, comfort, and de - fend us, gra- cious Lord. **C** A - men

***HYMN OF PRAISE: “Glory to God” (LBW pg. 78-79)**



A Glo-ry to God in the high-est, and peace to his peo-ple on earth.



B Lord God, heav-en-ly king, al-might-y God and Fa-ther:



We wor-ship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glo-ry.



Lord Je-sus Christ, on-ly Son of the Fa-ther, Lord God, Lamb of God:



You take a-way the sin of the world; have mer-cy on us.



You are seat-ed at the right hand of the Fa-ther; re-ceive our prayer.



For you a-lone are the Ho-ly One, you a-lone are the Lord,



you a-lone are the Most High, Je-sus Christ, with the Ho-ly Spir-it,



in the glo-ry of God the Fa-ther. A-men

***PRAYER OF THE DAY:**

P Let us pray: Almighty God, in the midst of the storms of life, Christ's presence brings eternal peace and calms our fears. Grant us peace through scripture, and through the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Then send us forth to be signs of Christ's peace in the world;

C **through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.**

FIRST LESSON: Job 38:4-18

A A reading from Job.

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

A The Word of the Lord.

C **Thanks be to God.**

PSALM: 18:1-7, 17

A ¹I love you, O LORD my strength, O LORD my stronghold, my crag, and my haven.

C ²**My God, my rock in whom I put my trust, my shield, the horn of my salvation, and my refuge: You are worthy of praise.**

A ³I will call upon the LORD, and so shall I be saved from my enemies.

C ⁴**The breakers of death rolled over me, and the torrents of oblivion made me afraid.**

A ⁵The cords of hell entangled me, and the snares of death were set for me.

C ⁶**I called upon the LORD in my distress and cried out to my God for help.**

A ⁷He heard my voice from his heavenly dwelling; my cry of anguish came to his ears.

C ¹⁷**He reached down from on high and grasped me; he drew me out of great waters.**

SECOND LESSON: Romans 10:5-17

A A reading from Romans.

⁵Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. ⁶But 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). ⁸But 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); ⁹because, 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. ¹⁰For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” ¹²For 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. ¹³For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” ¹⁴How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵And how are they

to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” ¹⁶But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “LORD, who has believed what he has heard from us?” ¹⁷So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

A The Word of the Lord.

C **Thanks be to God.**

***VERSE:**



***HOLY GOSPEL: Matthew 14:22-33**

P The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the fourteenth chapter.

C **Glory to you, O Lord.**

²²Immediately {Jesus} made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” ²⁸And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and

beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

P The Gospel of the Lord.

C **Praise to you, O Christ.**

CHILDREN’S MESSAGE

SERMON: Pastor Dwight Hanson - Wind or Hand

(Find Sermon at back of bulletin.)

***HYMN OF THE DAY: “*Eternal Father, Strong to Save*” (LBW 467)**

***APOSTLES’ CREED:**

C **I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.**

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

PRAYERS:

A Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, the lesson from your Word is clear. When we lose our focus on your beloved Son, the wind and waves overwhelm us. Even so, the hand of Christ reaches out, providing strength and courage again. Impress this image upon the mind of your Church. In

unsteady times, draw us to the one who calms troubled waters and troubled hearts. Lord in your mercy,

C Hear our prayer.

A Pour out the Holy Spirit on the whole Christian Church, that we may be Christ-centered. Fill us with faith. Send us forth as Good News ambassadors. In storm or sunshine, lead the way. We ask your blessing on the whole NALC, and we thank you for blessing our District gathering yesterday, in this very place. Lord, in your mercy,

C Hear our prayer.

A We pray, O Lord, for the needs of the world. Thank you for our County Fair and bless all the young participants who are learning about stewardship and the blessings of creation. We lift up nations at war and pray for your peace to descend. Comfort all who have suffered from disasters and grant them resilience. According to your sovereign will, inspire and guide civil servants at every level for the good of all. Protect all who serve with honor, standing in harm's way, and their families. Lord, in your mercy,

C Hear our prayer.

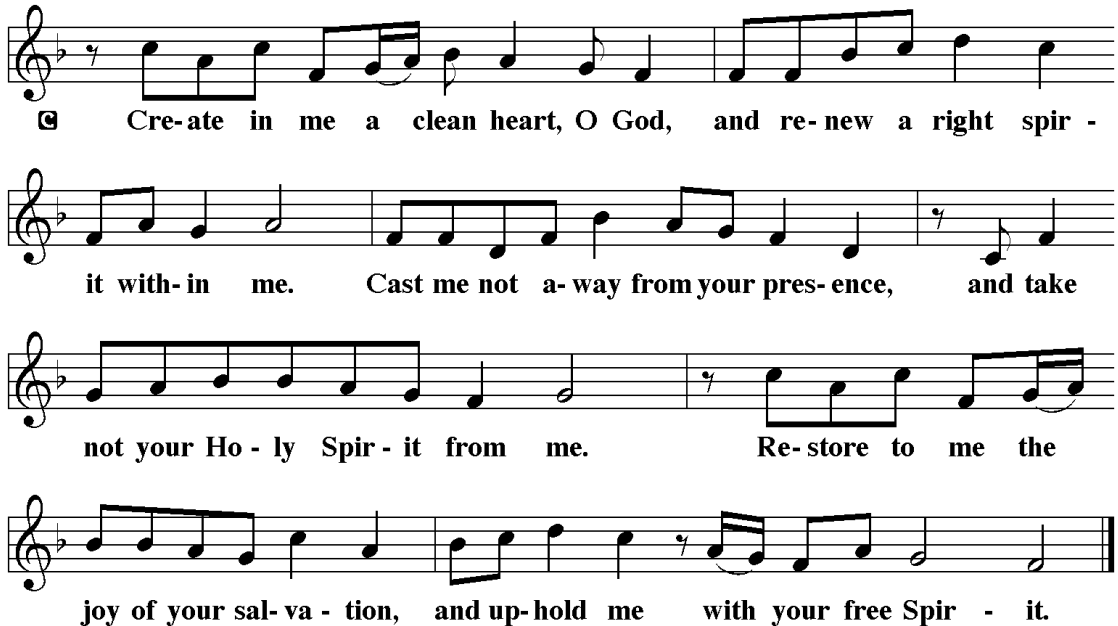
A We pray to you on behalf of all who need healing: *Tracy, Charlie, Jim Carlisle, Peggy Christian, Kelly Coffman, Tiffany Daugherty, Claude Dixon, Michael Good, Becky Haws, Amy & Bryan Jackson, Jim Kay, Paula Murray, Dave O'Shea, Sue Robinson, Karen Schaeff, Iva-Laura Sherry, Dean Shetter, Allie Steele-Rios, Mark Steiner, Mike & Barb Studebaker, Wayne Williams*, as well as those whom we name in our hearts (pause for additional names). Into your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray,

C Trusting in your mercy, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

OFFERING

VOLUNTARY

***OFFERTORY RESPONSE:**



Cre-ate in me a clean heart, O God, and re-new a right spir -
it with- in me. Cast me not a- way from your pres- ence, and take
not your Ho - ly Spir - it from me. Re- store to me the
joy of your sal- va - tion, and up- hold me with your free Spir - it.

***OFFERTORY PRAYER:**

P Let us pray.

P Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things.

C Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

***LORD'S PRAYER:**

C Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

***BLESSING:**

P The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.
The Lord look upon you with favor and + give you peace.
C **Amen.**

***SENDING HYMN: “*My Life Flows on in Endless Song*” (WOV 781)**

***DISMISSAL:**

A Go in peace. Serve the Lord.
C **Thanks be to God.**

POSTLUDE

Adapted from Sundays and Seasons.com. Copyright 2026 Augsburg Fortress. All rights reserved. Liturgy reprinted by permission under Augsburg Fortress Liturgies Annual License #22413. All hymns used by permission of CCLI License #44125 or are in the Public Domain. The English Standard Version is published with the permission of Good News Publishers. ([English Standard Version - The Holy Bible Online](#))

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS



The flowers on the altar this morning are given to the Glory of God by: Nancy & Scott Parkinson in Honor & Celebration of Scott's 65th Birthday.

Campfires of Grace—Summer 2026:

When? The third Wednesday of each summer month: August 19.

What time? 7:00 PM.

For whom? Everyone.

Where? By the campfire ring near the picnic shelter.

What to bring? Just yourself (and a friend, if you like), a lawn chair, and a heart that's ready to relax and enjoy an outdoor tradition.



Phoebe Women's Bible Study PRESENTS:
A Night at the Movies
"Flywheel"
Monday, Aug. 10th
6:30 p.m.

GRACE AT A GLANCE

Grace Lutheran Church

111 Lutheran Dr., P.O. Box 86 - Eaton, OH 45320
Phone: 937-456-6258 Email: GraceEaton111@gmail.com
www.gracelutheranofeaton.com ~~ Like us on Facebook

OFFICE HOURS:

Monday -Friday: 10—1, 2—5

TODAY August 9, 2026—11th Sunday after Pentecost

9:30 a.m. Worship
10:30 a.m. Fellowship & Adult Education — Lessons of the Day

Monday August 10

 Pastor's Day Off
9:45 a.m. Choose to Lose
6:30 p.m. Phoebe Movie Night – “Flywheel”

Tuesday August 11

10:00 a.m. Worship Committee Meeting
5:30 p.m. Mom's Bible Study “Boundaries”

Wednesday August 12

9:00 a.m. Bible Study

Thursday August 13

7:00 p.m. Church Council Meeting
7:00 p.m. AA Meeting

Friday August 14

12:30 p.m. Bulletin Production

Saturday August 15 —Grace Herald DEADLINE

UPCOMING WEEK SPECIAL EVENTS

Sun 8/16—Worship w/Holy Communion, Fellowship & Adult Education
Mon. 8/17—Pastor Off, Choose to Lose
Tues. 8/18—Homeless Shelter Meal Sponsor: Nancy Childs
Wed. 8/19—Bible Study, Church Campfire
Thurs. 8/20—PERI Meeting, Grace Fiber Gild, AA Meeting
Fri. 8/21— Bulletin Production
Sat. 8/22—

WORSHIP ASSISTANTS

Altar Guild for August: Janice & Gretchen Pearce

Offering Counter for August: Janice Barnes

Sunday, August 9—Pentecost 11

9:30 a.m.

Greeter: Terry & Evelyn Good

Usher: Gary Pemberton

Lector: Nancy Childs

Acolyte: Jessa Barnes

Sunday, August 16—Pentecost 12

9:30 a.m.

Greeter: Allen & Kelly Coffman

Usher: Allen Coffman

Lector: Kelly Coffman

Communion: Wanda Winter, Elaine Fudge

Acolyte: Sophia Steiner

Sunday, August 23—Pentecost 13

9:30 a.m.

Greeter: Scott & Nancy Parkinson

Usher: Scott & Nancy Parkinson

Lector: Barb Myers

Acolyte: Jessa Barnes

Attendance & Stewardship — (\$4,187 needed wkly.)

08/02/2026	70	\$4,450.00
------------	----	------------

Great Commission Outreach Partners: World mission Prayer League – Chris & Emily & family, Lutheran Military Veterans and Families, Abundant Grace, West Chester

Grace Lutheran Mission Endowment Fund: The purpose of this fund is to extend the ministry of Grace Lutheran Church, apart from the general operation of the congregation. To learn more about our Mission Endowment Fund, please contact the church office and we'll give your question to the appropriate person.

IN OUR PRAYERS

After 4 weeks we will remove names from this list. If you would like to keep someone on the list, please note their name on the back of the “Attendance & Communion Registration” form.

URGENT PRAYER LIST:

HEALING: (In Alphabetical Order)

Tracy: (Cousin of Suzie Dell who is battling with stage 3 endometriosis cancer)

Charlie: (11-year-old son of a former student of Nancy Parkinson—Charlie is awaiting a liver transplant)

Jim Carlisle: (Healing from hip surgery)

Peggy Christian: (Discharged from Vancrest and now at home)

Kelly Coffman: (Having tests due to heart issues)

Tiffany Daugherty: (Daughter-in-Law of Richard and Jane Coggin -- She is undergoing tests for health issues)

Claude Dixon: (Father of Suzie Dell — recovering from a fall, at home)

Michael Good: (At home recovering from surgery).

Becky Haws: (Friend of Janet Burkett—Prayers for healing)

Amy & Bryan Jackson: (for comfort and healing)

Jim Kay: (Son-in-law of the late Elsie Burkle—he is dealing with health issues)

Paula Murray: (Has a serious infection in foot; and other health issues)

Dave O’Shea: (Father of Kelly Hanson — Dealing with Parkinson’s Disease and a hip replacement)

Sue Robinson: (Friend of Grace & AA Coordinator—in nursing home with leg infection and heart issues.)

Karen Schaeff: (She is recovering from surgery (on Friday 8/8) to repair her collar bone after falling from her bicycle)

Iva-Laura Sherry: (Kelly Coffman’s mom—Recovering from hand surgery)

Dean Shetter: (Recovering from shoulder replacement surgery).

Allie Steele Rios: (Niece of Mary & Dean Shetter—as she prepares for brain surgery on August 12th to remove a mass — an 8+ hour surgery)

Mark Steiner: (Matt’s father — prayers for healing).

Mike & Barb Studebaker: (Mike: dealing with health issues; Barb: recovering from surgery for leg fracture).

Wayne Williams: (Nephew of Karen Schaeff & cousin of Adam – he is beginning radiation therapy for cancer)

LONG-TERM PRAYER LISTGeorge & Barb Suggs, Violet Forney, Mark & Jary Tannehill, Jackie Steiner, Connie Martin, Maggie Risko, Rhonda Paige Atkinson, Amy & Bryan Jackson, Andy Proeschel, Judy Newkirk, Mike & Judy Schamel, Suzan Pauley, Carmen Hasdorff, Tom Schamel, Amanda & Shayla Dell, Fran Kester, Teddi & Mike Watkins, Jenifer Combs, Doug Davis, Pastor Dean & Sandy Haferman, Dave Brumbaugh, Scot Emig, Barbara Worley, Carolyn MacFadyen, Judy Jay, Will Suggs, Earl House, Barbara Lakes, Becky Hoskins, Kayli Johnson, Joe McHenry, Tom Barnes: and those serving in the military: Maj. Love Hartman; Brad Newkirk; Lt. Col. Kyle Hundley, Travis Deck & family.

NALC Disaster Response
Kit Packing List
Bibles & School Kits

Bibles

(We encourage you to write messages of hope in the front pages of donated Bibles)

- New or used (highlighted & underlined text is acceptable)
- Child, teen or adult
- Bible stories for children
- Spanish, or any language
- Large print prayer books

School Kit – *Elementary*

- 1 backpack or duffle bag
- 4 notebooks
- 4 pocket folders
- 1 blunt scissor
- 1 ruler
- 1 pencil sharpener
- 4 pencils
- 2 pens
- 1 eraser
- 1 box of crayons, colored pencils, or markers, or markers
- 1 glue stick
- 1 Hand sanitizer or wipes

School Kit – *High School*

- 1 backpack or duffle bag
- 4 composition books
- 4 pencils, 1 pencil sharpener & 1 eraser – or – 4 mechanical pencils
- 2 pens
- 1 Hand sanitizer or wipes

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14) – August 9, 2026

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); 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. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

– Romans 10:8-9, 13-15, 17 –

Have you ever finished a great book or watched an entertaining movie and couldn't wait to share it with someone? It's only natural to want to share special moments with others; we were made to be in relationships. And, feeling knowledgeable and excited about something, makes it all the easier to share.

How many times, however, have you thought, “I know I should share the Gospel, but I don't always feel comfortable doing it,” so it gets left up to pastors, leaders of the Church, and theologians; people who are “qualified” to share the Gospel. But guess what? We have everything we need to share the Gospel, and it's not only good news but a message of salvation! So what holds us back?

We read in Romans 10:8, “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 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.” These are the very words we can proclaim and share with others. When we allow the power of the Holy Spirit to work in and through us, sharing the Gospel will become as natural as sharing about a good book!

Allow God to work through you today, because someone is out there waiting to hear the Good News of the Gospel from you! Let the last words of Romans 10:17 resonate within you, “As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” Amen.

11th Sunday after Pentecost; 8/9/2026; Grace Lutheran Church; Pastor Dwight Hanson
Job 38:4-18; Psalm 18:1-7, 17; Romans 10:5-17; Matthew 14:22-33

Children's message: What's the first thing that comes to your mind when I say the word "strength"? Muscles? What about other kinds of strength? Our Psalm for today says, "I love you, O LORD, my strength..." (Psalm 18:1a). What do you think that means? Strength for the heart, mind, and spirit. Jesus gives it all through the years. Let's pray...

Wind or Hand

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

First, the condensed version of the sermon. If you walk away with these two phrases from Matthew 14, how they interact with each other and challenge each other in our very lives, you'll have the message firmly in mind. The first quote is this, "the wind was against them" (Mt. 14:24b). The second is: "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (Mt. 14:27b). The wind was against them, but when it mattered most, the everlasting hand reached for Peter amid the waves (Mt. 14:31). Take heart, indeed. Uncomfortable reality, meet the one who has overcome the world. Wind or hand. There it is in a nutshell.

Now let's fill that out a bit. First, the rough waves and that challenging wind. From early times Christians have heard this passage of the Bible in the context of their own lives, the correlation being fairly obvious.

In many churches, it's not hard to look up and see wooden beams and think of a ship. In fact, as I'm sure I've mentioned before, the main part of the sanctuary is called a "nave" for this reason, from the same root word as "navy." When the Church is in worship, we're in what I once heard called "God's ship sailing on an ocean of time."

Hearing the Scriptures, singing the hymns together, seeing the ancient symbols of our faith, all of it fired the imagination and inspired the heart, which was very much needed. For as surely as they sought the things of God, there was no denying that their lives were lived in the world, with all its rough seas and contrary winds.

Experience-tested Christians know that even in the fourth watch of the night, the very darkest section, the Light is coming. Jesus is with us. His name and presence mean our safe harbor. It's why St. Paul put so much emphasis on confessing Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:13).

That may not sound like the biggest thing to do, but when it comes from the heart, it's everything (see Rom. 10:9). For there are contrary winds that do not want it to be so. Why else has there been so much pressure, all through the centuries, applied to Christians to deny their Lord? The history books are filled with instances. If, as many

say, it doesn't really matter, and anything goes, this assertion is betrayed by actions too numerous to count. An easy-speaking atheism or agnosticism eventually reveals its hard-hearted, cutting edge. Idolatry will do the same, with its false foundations. Why else would so many work so hard to stop the free exercise of Christian faith? The adversarial winds are real. There are fallen powers and dangerous currents in the water. They present themselves differently in different cultures, depending on place and time. But adverse and stormy they remain. Nonetheless, God has provided a ship, and Jesus is the Captain.

Even in modern times, it wasn't that many years ago when ISIS forces rolled through parts of the ancient world, where Christians had been for centuries, and presented them with ugly options: flea, convert or die. Sometimes the spiritual darkness seems darker than usual in the fourth watch of the night. But Jesus is always near. We must remember that.

Years ago, at one of our Convocations, we heard from a representative of a ministry called "The Voice of the Martyrs." Their mission is to find and support persecuted Christians. In a book that was co-sponsored by them [Jesus Freaks], I read about a Christian man in Cuba who had a rifle aimed at the back of his head. He was told by his tormentor that he was alone and had better renounce his faith. The Christian man informed his captor that both of them were, in fact, surrounded by a whole cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12). The man with the gun became unsettled at this thought. Perhaps his atheism wasn't as strong as he thought? Maybe childhood faith lessons had lingered in his conscience, at least enough to make him uneasy? By the way, the Christian man lived on and dedicated his life to ministry.

In another instance, a Christian was put in chains and thrown in a cold, dark cell. He knew about Paul and Silas in their Philippian cell, so he, too, began to sing hymns. Not only that, in order to accentuate his singing, he thought it would be a good idea to add some percussion. So, he used his metal chains to clank together in rhythm with the beat, all while he sang of the glory of the everlasting God.

Sobering stories, but amazing, Spirit-led responses. We're called to face reality in this world. I think it was at that same Convocation where I heard these words: "The days of comfortable Christianity are over." By that, I think the speaker meant an easy-going, cultural Christianity. The distinction is important, for based on this morning's readings, the real comfort of Christians is, and has been, very much alive.

And if there were times when people thought they could just keep their faith on the back-burner, like something that doesn't really matter, well, that wasn't even true at the time. Church was never meant to be an occasional hobby or club. Certainly, in our day, it won't enhance your general social standing with the online influencers and trend-setters.

But if you're looking for calm amid the storm, for steadiness amid the swaying, for Light in the darkness, for a strong arm when you need it most, then the Christian Church is just the place.

It was at that same Convocation where other speakers told of surprising renewal movements all over, with remarkable strength and vitality. God hasn't left Himself without a witness! It's just that it's not always easy. But that brings us right back to that everlasting helping hand, reaching right down to overwhelmed Peter, and to the words: "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (Mt. 14:27b).

Remember, while the disciples were rowing, but getting nowhere, Jesus, for his part, had been up to the top of the mountain, where he prayed well into the night. Then, renewed, strengthened, focused, he came to his chosen disciples, walking toward them on troubled water. But he wasn't troubled. Into their wind-weary exhaustion and fright, the Lord, himself, entered.

It's good to be together in God's ship sailing on an ocean of time. Yes, the contrary winds can be strong for long stretches. But never forget that from Pentecost Day onward, another wind has been blowing, this one directly from Heaven, itself. It fills our sails, and pushes confidently at our backs.

Storms blow in every generation, and for that matter, in every individual's life. But here comes Jesus. And then that steady hand reaches down to foolish us, we of little faith.

Then we recover. Our minds clear. We know who we are again, and where we're going.

"Steady as she goes," straight toward the sunrise that never ends. Thanks be to God.

Amen.