

Rev Dr Nathan John Haydon
 St Peter's Episcopal Church, Ladue
 Sermon
 9 August 2026, Proper 14 Year A

Collect of the Day

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Assigned Lectionary Readings: Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Sermon

The author Kathleen Norris writes in her book entitled *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, of a time where she had presented some of her work to an audience at a Catholic college. As the event was coming to a close and she was finishing the Q&A session, a young woman raised her hand, and gave this comment: "I don't mean to be offensive... but I don't understand how you can get so much comfort from a religion whose language does so much harm."

Norris was *not* offended by this woman's comment, because she understood how strange the vocabulary or terms are that Christians use, especially to those who may not be Christian. So Norris thought about what this woman said, and after a few moments, gave a response. This is what she describes about that moment:

I realized that what troubled me most was her use of the word "comfort," so in my reply I addressed that first. I said that I didn't think it was comfort I was seeking, or comfort that I'd found. Look, I said to her, as a rush of words came to me. As far as I'm concerned, this religion has saved my life, my husband's life, and our marriage. So it's not comfort that I'm talking about but salvation.¹

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. Riverhead Books (1998), 3-4.

It may seem like a strange thing to say – that it isn't comfort she is seeking, or comfort she found in her faith. It may seem strange when surely some of us have found moments of comfort, but I would wager that for many of us, those moments of comfort are still only received after a hard struggle to attain it; you didn't immediately receive it, but had to endure the crucible and testing of experience to finally reach the moment where the demands on your faith become assuaged.

And yet – is that truly comfort? I'm inclined to think it isn't – or at least, not the sort of comfort that we think of, and not what I think the scriptures point us to. Comfort and salvation. The conceptions, or misconceptions, of these two words matter. Two ideas and realities that our spirits yearn for, but I think we often sell ourselves short in how we seek them, and accept ideas that are mere shadows of the truth that the scriptures proclaim.

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

One commentator describes Jesus as being a bit bossy in this passage;² he makes, or compels the disciples to get into a boat so they can get a head start in their journey. We see them sleepless and assailed by rough waters, and then when they see Christ walking on the water, in their state they become terrified. Interestingly, the Greek word here for terrified is also described as

² Zina Jacque, "Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33," from *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19/commentary-on-matthew-1422-33-7>. Accessed 8 August 2026.

agitation, as in roiling water. The turbulence they feel inside is matched by the turbulent waters they have been in all through the night. And so it is in the middle of the night, when the darkness seems its darkest, that Christ is found. In this mysterious moment, Jesus does not actually seem to be going towards them, but he is not absent; he is in the chaos of the water and the storm, walking beside them. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” One of the most important proclamations in this phrase is obscured; when Jesus says “it is I,” this is not any mere identification; think of Moses and Burning Bush, when he asks for God’s name, and the response is “I am.” A simple declaration, and yet so expansive as to contain everything we need. So what does comfort mean here? The waves and the storm have not subsided, but the fullness of the Lord stands before them, as a reminder that in the darkest of times, the radiance of the Holy One pierces the sorrows that can only be found in sleepless, anxious nights. Jesus said to get into the boat, and go on ahead to the other side. If Jesus says it, then nothing will stop it. We may have to endure the waves crashing against us, but we have not been given what we have just so we end up slipping into the depths and drown. Christ descended into that abyss so we wouldn’t have to.

Until we come to know this within the depths of our own spirit, then I think we may not fully understand the next idea: salvation. We tend to relegate salvation as the concern of whether we are going to heaven or hell; in other words, “are you saved?” While eternity is, of course, a significant concern, thinking of salvation only in terms of heaven and hell is an impoverished view of the truth. When Peter decides to literally test the waters and step out of the boat, in fear he cries out “Lord, save me!” The word for “salvation” and the word for “save” are the same word in Greek, and I can assure, when Peter cried out for Jesus to save him, he wasn’t thinking of heaven or hell; he thought he was going to die, and he needed Jesus to reach out his hand more than anything in that moment. Rowan Williams writes that “the new humanity that is

created around Jesus is not a humanity that is always going to be successful and in control of things, but a humanity that can reach out its hand from the depths of chaos, to be touched by the hand of God.”³ To be saved means that the hand of God contained in Christ, our Light from Light, our True God from True God, will grab us when we encounter the tragedies, travails, and traumas of life. To be saved means we are made whole in body and spirit; that we are healed in body and spirit; and that we are fully alive from the breath of God that fills our body and spirit. The priest and poet Malcolm Guite says it this way:

“He calls us all to step aboard his ship, / Take the adventure on this morning’s wing,
 Raise sail with him, launch out into the deep, / Whatever storms or floods are threatening.
 If faith gives way to doubt, or love to fear, / Then, as on Galilee, we’ll rouse the Lord,
 For he is always with us and will hear / And make our peace with his creative Word,
 Who made us, loved us, formed us and has set / All his beloved lovers in an ark;
 Borne upwards by his Spirit, we will float / Above the rising waves, the falling dark,
 As fellow pilgrims, driven towards that haven, / Where all will be redeemed, fulfilled,
 forgiven.”⁴

Paul says that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” I am proclaiming this message to you now; and I hope you share it with others. When Peter and Jesus get back into the boat, the wind ceased from blowing. Storms do not last for ever. So thanks be to God that our comfort is contained in the mystery of our salvation, a salvation that brings hope and healing.

AMDG

³ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*. Eerdmans (2014), 4.

⁴ Malcolm Guite, “The Calling of the Disciples,” <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2022/02/06/the-call-of-the-disciples/>. Accessed 8 August 2026.

