

Proper 14 (August 10, 2014) Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Readings: Job 38:4–18; Psalm 18:1–9 (7–16); Romans 10:5–17; Matthew 14:22–33

“Eternal Father, Strong to Save” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #717)

So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Matthew 14:29:30

The image of a ship tossed on a raging sea is imbedded deep in our imagination. The ancient world had stories such as *The Odyssey* and *Jason and the Argonauts* and in popular culture we find movies such as *Titanic*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Master and Commander* and a raft (sorry, couldn’t resist the pun) of other swashbucklers that use the microcosm of a ship* to illustrate how human beings relate to one another in circumstances of distress.

Likewise, the Holy Scriptures are replete with stories that take place on and around the sea: *Noah and the Ark*; *Moses Parting the Red Sea*; *The Story of Jonah*; *The Miraculous Catch of Fish*, *Christ Calming the Storm* and, of course, today’s gospel lesson of Jesus walking upon the sea recorded in the 14th chapter of the Book of Matthew. The sea is mysterious, perilous and uncontrollable and every sailor knows that even the most technologically sophisticated ship is vulnerable to the unforgiving might of the sea.

In the year 1860 a young English school boy was about to travel across the Atlantic to the United States. He was one of a close-knit group of students who were under the tutelage of William Whiting. The youngster was justifiably terrified and asked his friends and his teacher to pray for him. In response to the boy’s request Whiting wrote the hymn “*Eternal Father, Strong to Save*”.

The hymn, with music by John Bacchus Dykes, soon became a favorite of sailors in the British Empire and with the French Navy as well. In the United States it is known as “*The Navy Hymn*” and was sung at the funerals of both Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy.

The first stanza, addressed to God the Father, is based on the Miracle of Christ calming the storm from Mark 5:39-41. The next two stanzas are later editions by Robert M. Spencer and pray for safety for those who travel by land and air. The original stanzas are printed on page 718 of the *LSB* and are directed to Christ and the Holy Spirit respectively. The last stanza, which is slightly altered to include all who travel by sea, air and land, is a prayer dedicated to the Holy Trinity.

No matter which stanzas you choose to sing, the theme is the same: in life we are surrounded by perils over which we have no control, but through the gift of faith we are bold to trust in the power of God to save us.

Peter, pummeled by the wind and waves, feared for his life and realized that he was powerless to save himself—he sank like the proverbial rock after which he was named—crying out, “Lord, save me!” The Master immediately upheld him and brought him to safety. We’re all in that same boat and, like Peter or that young English schoolboy, know we cannot save ourselves. When confronted by the depth of the ocean or the depth of our sins, we have no way to pull ourselves from disaster; we can only raise our, “Hosanna—save us now!” in the hope that God will hear our prayer and reach down to pull us up. And He does. He always does.

Luther reminds us that every day we die and rise as we remember our baptism. Each day we are taken up from the waters of death and revived by the power of the Holy Spirit to live the new life that God freely offers. This is the Good News that is ours through the saving work of the one true Master and Commander. So let us sing this hymn with all confidence, trusting in the grace, mercy and power of God to bring us safely home.

Prayer

The following prayer can be sung to the melody of "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" – tune: MELITA.

O Christ, who took Saint Peter's hand
And carried him safe to dry land,
When we, in danger, to Thee cry
Save us, O Lord, and draw us nigh.
Lord hear our prayer and grant that we
May live with Thee eternally.

Commander of the wind and wave
Thy Son Thou sent and thus did save
The world and all who dwell therein
From Satan's power of death and sin.
Lord hear our prayer and grant that we
May with live Thee eternally.

And when we take our final breath
And close our eyes to sleep in death
May we, with all the saints, arise
To join their chorus in the skies!
Lord hear our prayer and grant that we
May live with Thee eternally.

Dr. Jeffrey E. Burkart
Emeritus Professor of Education and Artist in Residence
Concordia University, St. Paul, MN



*Other "ship microcosm" movies that can be used for discussion are: *Ship of Fools*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Hunt for Red October*, *Captain Phillips*, *The Caine Mutiny*, *Lifeboat*, *Two Years before the Mast*, *Captains Courageous* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*, to name a few.

Musical accompaniment:

The musical accompaniment (tune: MELITA 88 88 88) contains a beautiful piece of text painting. Note the ascending tenor and bass lines in the second full measure and the ascending chromatic bass and melody lines starting in measure five that musically bespeak a confident hope that God will raise us up and bring us to Himself.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.]

Eternal Father, Strong to Save

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep:
O hear us when we cry to thee
For those in peril on the sea.

O Christ, the Lord of hill and plain
O'er which our traffic runs amain
By mountain pass or valley low;
Wherever, Lord, thy brethren go,
Protect them by thy guarding hand
From every peril on the land.

O Spirit, whom the Father sent
To spread abroad the firmament;
O Wind of heaven, by thy might
Save all who dare the eagle's flight,
And keep them by thy watchful care
From every peril in the air.

O Trinity of love and power,
Our brethren shield in danger's hour;
From rock and tempest, fire and foe,
Protect them whereso'er they go,
Thus evermore shall rise to thee
Glad praise from air and land and sea.

*Original stanzas (alt.)**

*O Christ! Whose voice the waters heard
And hushed their raging at Thy word,
Who walkedst on the foaming deep,
And calm amid its rage didst sleep;
O hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

*Most Holy Spirit! Who didst brood
Upon the chaos dark and rude,
And bid its angry tumult cease,
And give, for wild confusion, peace;
O hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea!

Text: William Whiting, 1825-1878, sts. 1, *2, *3, 4 alt: Robert N. Spencer, 1877-1961, st. 2-3, alt.
Music: John B. Dykes, 1823-1876

Text (sts. 1, *2, *3, 4) and music Public domain
Text (sts. 2-3): © The Church Pension Fund