

“Fear Not”
Matthew 14:22-33
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 9, 2020

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

Our text, the gospel reading, Jesus walking on the waves and speaking to his fearful disciples, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As with last week’s meditation on the feeding of the 5000, we again today have a text so well known and so well loved that we often are quick to simply apply it to daily life, allegorizing it the “winds and waves of life” – and that’s not wrong, *per se*, but – if we consider the text carefully we don’t *have to* allegorize (or, if you will, *pretend* this is a cryptic story meant to project into our daily lives); rather, we can learn how all the problems we fret over and allow to captivate our confidence and lockdown our lives ... all those problems and all God’s dealings with them... are no different than what’s already been lived before us.

There’s a big difference between those two understandings of our text, isn’t there? The former – the idea that this is a story we ought allegorize as a story about our daily lives – leaves one not clinging to the historical certainty of it, but only using it as an object lesson and convincing himself the Bible is relevant to him. The latter – the truth that this happened in history – humbles us who think our lives and our struggles cannot be known by anyone before us – it

humbles us to realize there's nothing terribly unique about our problems, but it also comforts us and encourages us to know there's nothing about our problems that God hasn't addressed and answered and calmed before. Yes, how often people want to tell us how unique we are! – And there's some truth to that – no one has your fingerprints or dental record. But when we pride ourselves on being so unique and independent and autonomous, we begin to think our problems are unique and isolated and “known only to me.” As much as we had *prided* ourselves, equally we *pity* ourselves – for “no one can know my misery, my trials, my tribulations.”

But then we read the text for today and we hear fearful followers of Jesus – supposed professionals at navigating the winds and waves – terrified for their lives and incapable of helping themselves, and we say, “Oh, all the trials and tribulations I have and that make me feel like God has forgotten me and I'm drowning... well, I guess this sort of thing has happened before. And, I guess God knew how to handle it.”

Isn't that what our Old Testament reading reminds us? Sometimes, God's love is tough love. Sometimes, the best way for God to express love is not to pamper the pitiable, but to put down their pride and put an end to their self-pitying. Isn't that what the Lord lovingly does to Job?

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, who determined its measurements – surely you know!... Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this.”

(Well, that quiets our self-wallowing, doesn't it!)

What is striking about our Gospel reading is that, where we sometimes try and differentiate the ‘Almighty God’ who thundered over Job from the tender, loving Jesus who calmed the disciples (as if the two are not exactly the same God!), Jesus himself actually appeals to His same authority and power, the likes of which neither the disciples nor Job could explain, but nevertheless upon which they could completely depend... when Jesus not only calmly walks atop the water and cuts right through the very winds and waves that were threatening the twelve, but then also says: “Take heart, I AM; fear not.”

As with last week, the words surrounding the miracle are (in a way) even more important to hang on to than the miracle itself. The miracle is important because it shows us who Jesus truly is. But, in this case, all the more so do the words Jesus speaks! We need not hope that Jesus will come walking on the water to us, but we may *more* than hope – cherish! –that those same words and dialogue with the disciples teach and comfort us, too!

To be sure, we can be taught by the *whole* dialogue – including the disciples’ words, for they often confess and exhibit the

very fears and knee-jerk reactions we have. And here, when they are at their wits' end, when it seems life itself is in peril, and when the divine enters the fray, they find it more reasonable to think it a ghost – a phantasma – than the very God-man who's been teaching them and eating with them and living among them for a few years! Yes, as irrational as are phantoms, we sinners find that the easier explanation than to recall and take comfort in God's promise to be involved in and defend our lives!

But Jesus' words ought silence our quaking hearts when we would allow ourselves to be so easily led astray: "Take heart, I AM; fear not."

Those words not only floated over the water and cut through the wind that night, but we would do well to understand that they hover over and govern all of daily life and cut through all of the panicky situations that would threaten faith with fear.

Consider the appeal that Jesus makes here and how we have heard it again, if you will, throughout these last five months: "Take heart!" He begins. From the Greek, "Take courage! Cheer up!" This is the same greeting he gave to the paralytic, to the woman whom he healed from her bleeding, and to the disciples in the Upper Room when he said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but 'take courage, cheer up' – I have overcome the world."

Indeed, where the Christian has courage in the face of danger, he has every reason to cheer up. What can life or death do

to me – what can a pandemic or social unrest do to me? – if I am one *with God*. There’s the key... to be one with God. Isn’t that what the work of the Christ and the blood of His cross and the sacrificial death securing our justification is all about? Being one with God! And, yet, that’s really where these days of pandemic illness or social instability threaten us... they make us doubt all of that by wondering if it’s relevant or wondering if God has forgotten us. We need the assurance that “*God* is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble.”

In fact, isn’t that what Jesus emphasizes next? “Take heart, I AM (not merely, “it is I” – weak translation – but *ego eimi*, same phrase as when calling from the burning bush, same phrase as when he declared his divinity before the Jews: “Before Abraham was, I AM” ... “I AM” Jesus says and speaks into his fearful followers a backbone and resolve that says, “I have every reason to cheer up! For God Himself is with me!”

And, if God himself is with me, then I have no reason to fear. What does Jesus say?: “Take heart! I AM. *Fear not.*”

Again, consider this in light of this pandemic. Remember when this began, I reminded you that other than fear, love and trust in God, fear is always sinful... it’s always a result of worrying whether or not God is with me, my shield, my rock, my fortress. But, as we said, as baptized children of His, we have the *right* to call upon him in times of trouble, “Our help is in the name of the Lord.” (And,

unlike constitutional rights, divine rights can't suddenly be pulled out from underneath us by some governor's mandate!) And so, we said at this pandemic's beginning, "we will take precaution, but we will not fear." And when we first gathered together again in services, we said, "We will take precautions, but we will not fear." Friends, this is no pep talk, no self-help recitation. Nor is it mere wishful thinking or putting God to the test. Rather, it is faith's assurance: I have no reason to fear, but rather can be of good cheer in any and every situation, because the great I AM is on my side."

Isn't that how that psalm goes that I just cited: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the depth of the sea, though its waters roar and foam."

Now, before we run past this too quickly and become a bunch of generic American deists, consider this again... this importance of Jesus saying, "I AM. Fear not."

Friends, even our sermon hymn – and it's one I like a lot – but even our beloved hymn almost makes the mistake of forgetting that it is *Jesus*, and not just generically "God" who says "I AM." The hymn never once mentions Christ specifically. But isn't the actual comfort we have that it is the *incarnate* "I AM" who is with us? God is not just with us "in thought", nor is God merely "watching us from a distance," but rather Jesus said to those twelve, "I AM." Yes, the incarnate God was with them in that very moment, in those very

winds and waves, in their same flesh and blood. *That's* comfort.

That's reason to cheer up and take heart and be of good courage.

So, don't meditate on this text and think only of "winds and waves;" the presence of those winds and waves was countered by the presence of the Incarnate Christ... present *with* the disciples, *for* the disciples. Is that not also true in these pandemic days and days of social unrest? Our God is *with us* in flesh and blood, *with us* not merely in thought or watching the divine service from a distance, but, behold "this is my body, this is my blood." The great I AM is here, in this sanctuary, upon his altar, forgiving us, strengthening us, serving us.

Thus, we do not sing the Sanctus *about* the Incarnate Christ coming to visit us this holy hour, but *before, in the presence of, to the* Incarnate Christ – to welcome the Incarnate Christ (if you will) because He comes to us this very hour. Likewise, when the pastor pauses and kneels after the Words of Institution (as we will renew the custom in a few moments), it is not merely to acknowledge that Christ *once* gave His body and blood, but *now* gives it, *now* feeds you, *now* feasts with you as host of this most mysterious and heavenly banquet.

But, is this how Peter responds? Does he respond by holding fast to the promise that life can go on as it always has because the incarnate God is with us? No, rather Peter calls for the *extraordinary* to prove the present-with-us God: "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come

to you on the water.” He might as well have said, “Lord, if it is you, let me put you to the test.”

Isn't that how we often respond? – wanting Jesus to work outside his ordinary “keep calm and carry on” work in Word and Sacrament? We say, “You know, Jesus, under normal circumstances, I'd go for that Word and Sacrament stuff, but now I need something bigger and better – show me a sign!”

Even in the midst of our panicked ultimatums, Jesus is patient with us. He tells Peter to come, not to give in to Peter's demands, but to teach him by means of the situation he knows is coming. And, what is that situation that is coming? The same situation you and I always get into.... In difficult times, as long as we keep focused on Christ, we're fine. The minute we watch the protests, or listen to the media, or read the statistics, we flail about and think we are in horrible danger.

Peter takes his eyes off of Christ, begins to drown, and only then learns to pray what Jesus had in mind when first bidding him come: “Lord, save me.” That *should have been* the prayer from the boat. “Lord, save me.” That should be the prayer for all of daily life.

The Christian's salvation is not just the good news that he stands justified before God, as if once that good news has been sealed by the blood of Christ, now the Christian must navigate himself through the winds and waves of daily life and unto paradise. The Christian's salvation is also the deliverance *in* that justification

out of this world and *unto* eternal life. Thus, we may always pray, “Lord, save me,” not in doubt and fear, but in confidence and good cheer.

Peter prays it in fear, and the Lord lovingly chides his doubt. Why, friends, do we doubt? If you don’t come to private absolution because you tell yourself, “I can’t think of anything of which to repent,” I could readily fill in the blank for each of us: “Lord, forgive me for my doubt and my fear. You were so mindful of me that you died for me; you were so powerful on my behalf that you rose from the grave; you are so authoritative over all things that you will come again as both my brother and my judge. And, yet, I doubt, I fear, I begin to scheme my *own* plans because I worry *yours* might not see me through. Lord, save me.”

Now Jesus picks Peter up and places him *where*? Not by himself on the waves, not as champion in his self-help quest and his own personal ‘walk with Jesus,’ but rather he takes hold of him and puts him in the boat, just as he has placed you in the ark of the Church. He has not said to you, “Yes, you may test me with your own calls for an extraordinary sign and I will separate you out from the rest of the Church and give you your own personal Christianity.” Rather, he says, “My Church is your safety. My Church is where the winds cease. The troubles of life may buffet the sides of the Church; the government may threaten to close it; the culture may threaten to ‘cancel’ it; the world may try to silence it and destroy it; viruses

may threaten to sicken it... but no winds and waves – none of it! – will overtake my boat.”

Thus, our text ends right where your every day should end, your week should end, your life should end... there, in the boat (in the Church) they worshipped him – they knelt down to the incarnate God who was with them – and they revered and adored and confessed Him, “You are the Son of God.”

Such is our privilege this very hour. Such is our safety for all of life. Such is what keeps us calm as we are carried on through this turbulent life – the promise that the incarnate God is ours in every day of trouble: “Take heart. I AM. Fear not.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
August 9, 2020