

Proper 14 (A)
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Matthew 14:22-33
TLC, Keene, NH

“Lord, Increase Our Faith!”

“But immediately Jesus spoke to [His disciples], saying, ‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’”

“Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?’”

[Job 38:8-11]

Introduction

“ONE HUNDRED YEARS ago Galveston, Texas had more millionaires per square mile than the far more ... trendy city of Newport, Rhode Island.” So begins an account of one of the worst storm stories in U.S. history. Michael W. Smith in his book *Now Is Your Time* relates, where as other sciences were making great advances at the time, predicting the weather was still in its infancy. So, when a storm rose out of the Caribbean in late summer of 1900, arcing north and barreling down on the Galveston coast, the self-assured citizens were taken completely off guard. Whatever wasn't tied down became flying “shrapnel, fatally wounding terrified citizens who ventured outside to see what was going on. The unique tidal wave that formed carried a steamship *two miles* inland before laying the vessel down. By the time the storm had passed, thousands had perished. It was the worst weather-related loss of life in our history, the exact number of dead, never exactly known. [T. Nelson © 2000, 149ff]

How suddenly the storms of life catch us off-guard. How often our ferry of faith is quickly filled in times of anxiety, doubt, fear and insecurity ... to the point of being swamped. How often we ourselves are caught unawares by those storms that threaten an oft-fragile faith, bringing us to pray more often than we care to: *“Κυριε, σωσον με. Lord, save me!”*

For those of us who have tasted the brackish and brine ... for those who perhaps, even now, may be brought to exhaustion by our despair, Jesus, who comes to us on the water, is a welcomed sight ... His Word to us tantamount to hope and life.

Main Thought: Let the Pentecost people of God face life's unpredictability with confidence and faith. Let us be of good cheer, taking courage in the Savior's abiding Word: "*It is I. Do not be afraid!*"

OUR LIFE AND OUR TIMES ARE FOREVER FIXED AND FASTENED
IN THE HANDS OF THE GREAT **I AM**.

Amen.

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Well, when last we left off, the disciples were eating "leftovers," on a boat ride back across the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus was headed back into the hills to commune with His Father. Jesus is on land, His disciples are at sea. Nothing out of the ordinary about that, except what Jesus knows, His disciples don't.

Where, again, like last week's miracle, we are brought to ask the question, why is this story here? What does the Holy Spirit want us to know? What does He want us to do?

Well, "it was a dark and stormy night." Literally, pointing us once again to the disciple's dependence, and the Savior's sufficiency.

Wherein, Jesus, once He gives the good deposit of faith, doesn't just leave them - us - to fend for ourselves. It's a story tailor-made for our time, not a story for the world, one commentator notes, but one totally for the church.

"The scene, set between a crowd [14:12-21] and a crowd [14:34-36], involves *only* Jesus and the Twelve ... [All to say] the church in the world is as the church in a storm," and our getting through it depends on where, or in whom, we put our trust. [Craddock, et. al. *Preaching through the Christian Year*, A, 400-401]

Wherein, if we possess either a weak faith that needs strengthened or a strong faith that needs to be maintained [Pohl, *CJ*, July 1990, 264], how so we get there? We cast our eyes where they need to be – squarely on Jesus. We look to Him who ...

JESUS WATCHES, AND HE PRAYS.

²² ***Immediately*** [i.e. on the heels of the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus] ***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.***

While we are not certain as to who or what Jesus was praying for, a pretty good bet would be not only for Himself and the strength needed to complete His journey, but also for His disciples, who, Mark says, He was watching from a distance. Yes, how like our Lord and Savior in the midst of *our* confusion and misunderstanding to be on His knees, praying when our own prayers so often wither on the vine.

How [for] unlike our Savior, not to be distracted by the things of this world. He does not lose sight of the shore – the goal of bringing us home. Wherein, for us, it's more or less this or that task ... to this or that emotion ... to this or that trial ... and we become disoriented to His promises and grace to act.

But not so with our Lord ... who, even now, watches and graciously intercedes for His own. Where “our faith’s grip on the Father may loosen. But He, in whom we believe, holds us fast in His grasp.” In Him is folded – nail-scarred hands is faithfulness. In Him is a firm grip that will never let me go. What a comfort it is that when our faith falters, Christ’s does not, as He watches and prays over and for His own. [Thielicke, *How to Believe Again*, 70]

Wherein, secondly ...

JESUS also COMES TO HIS OWN ... to meet them in their need.

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 [3:00 – 6:00 a.m.] he came to them, walking on the sea.

To be sure, the “4th watch of the night” comes on us all: a phone call from the doctor that brings unwelcomed news, a sudden death that robs us of someone we love, an abrupt shift in our financial situation, an unexpected divorce ... COVID 19! Rocking our world, causing upheaval, and not a few sleepless nights.

For Job, not unlike for us, it takes a storm for us to see the Savior. Where, in His simple presence and Word, Jesus comes. Not always in some cascading waterfall, but in simple water ... not in a four-course meal, but in simple bread and wine ... not in volumes and volumes of rhetoric, but in a simple text on a page ... all to strengthen and restore our vision.

Not just to come to us, but ...

JESUS SPEAKS TO HIS OWN.

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 [“Fear out, cheer and good courage in!¹].”

“With only one exception, every time the word “take heart” occurs in the New Testament Jesus is the speaker. It is one of those beautiful Gospel imperatives, an efficacious word that conveys the power needed to obey. When Jesus says “take heart” his strong word bestows the courage and good cheer it commands.” [Sermon Studies on the Gospels (SSoG), A, 279]

But He doesn't stop there, saying: “It is I.” Literally, “I AM!”

¹ “The first imperative in the text is positive and matched by the second, a negative.” [Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 572]

“Who?” we ask. “You mean, *that* I AM?”

Of course, when God speaks out of the whirlwind we have right to be afraid and tremble, as Job found out. [38:4-14]. But that He would speak to us is sheer Gospel. That He bids us “*Be not afraid,*” life itself! We will not be undone, for Jesus prays for His own, He comes to His own, He speaks to His own.

JESUS INVITES HIS OWN to renew their trust and faith in Him.

²⁸And Peter answered him, “Lord, if [since] 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.

In the opening devotion in Herman Gockel’s *My Hand in His*, he tells the delightful story of a traveler in the Scottish highlands who saw a cluster of beautiful flowers far down the mountainside. The traveler promised a reward to a shepherd boy if he would pick them, offering to let him down by a rope.

“The boy eyed the stranger suspiciously and then, without a word, disappeared into the woods. In a moment he was back, but with him was his father. He was willing to be let down the mountainside *provided the rope was in his father’s hands!*” [3]

Child of God, it is these very hands, folded for you, that now beckon us to faith and trust ... the very same hands that would one day be stretched out for us ... inviting ... promising ...

JESUS SAVES.

³⁰But when [Peter] 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?”

How quickly our faith falters and deserts us at times. But how just as swiftly the Lord seizes us and hold us fast. Granted, Peter’s faith was little, but He had a great Lord.

Where at that moment the question for Peter is not a Nicene-like confession of faith ... a matter a matter of praying all the right words. After all, Peter was about to learn a lesson in treading water. He was as good as dead. [Thielicke, 75]

Wherein, how often our own “lack of faith manifests itself in doubts about career, marriage, guilt, finances, and even eternal life,” the effects of which are “anxiety, depression, and even emotional paralysis.” [Case, *CPR*, 3:3, 43]

Jesus saves. He ...

“Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb ... and prescribed limits for it ... and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther.’” [Job 38:8-11]

He, who ...

Isaiah 42:2 He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.

Wherein, faith is restored and “rooted in the faithful one himself, Jesus Christ, who was faithful for us, actively and passively, enduring the cross and rising victorious.” [Case, *CPR*, 3:3, 43]

“Strictly speaking it would not have been necessary for Jesus to reach out his hand to rescue Peter. A simple command would have sufficed. But was not the method which the Lord actually used reassuring? Jesus wanted Peter to *feel* his love as well as to experience his power.” [Hendriksen; see also Psalm 37:23-24, 91:11-12; Isaiah 40:11, 41:13, 49:16; John 10:27-30]

Where, in light of a Savior who watches and prays for His own, a Savior who comes to them, even in the storm, who speaks to them, and saves them ...

Do we, with THE DISCIPLES, come to WORSHIP Him!

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.”

May it be that after the storms are over, and the sea is smooth once again; when calm weather returns, and we are led back to the faith to which God has called us; then may things turn out as they did with the disciple, who, with the Centurion after him [27:54], could only fall to his knees and stammer: “*Truly, you are the Son of God!*” For He is ... for us! Always for us!

Conclusion

In the closing chapter of his book *The Perfect Storm*, Sebastian Junger makes this observation:

“Anyone who has been through a severe storm at sea has, to one degree or another, almost died, and that fact will continue to alter them long after the winds have stopped blowing and the waves have died down. Like a war or great fire, the effects of a storm go rippling outward through webs of people for years, even generations. It breaches lives like coastlines and nothing is ever again the same.” [219f]

For a few anglers on the Sea of Galilee one evening, their faith was sorely tried. Wherein, after the storm was over, nothing was the same. For it was then that their confidence and faith were placed squarely at the feet of Him who is the Son of God.

May our faith also find such safe harbor ... in this One who watches and prays for us ... in this One who comes to us in our need and saves. Bringing forth from our lips and our lives a confession and worship that may not be the most elaborate confession or prayer on the lips of Christ’s people, but Jesus would hear it, and for Him – and for us – it is enough. It is enough for us to ... *believe*.

Amen.