

"Why Did You Doubt?"
Matthew 14:22-33
Eleventh S. a. Pentecost
Messiah, Boerne
August 13, 2023

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Dear Friends in Christ:

Fear is a tremendous motivator of human behavior. The instant a person fears, chemicals are released into the bloodstream which enable a person to accomplish amazing physical feats. For example, when afraid, average people are suddenly able to lift heavy cars off trapped bodies or fight off stronger attackers. It's part of the "fight/flight" response common among God's creatures, a blessing to people and animals who suddenly find themselves in dangerous situations, but a challenge to Christians trying to put their faith into practice when afraid.

Jesus' disciples found themselves in a dangerous situation in our Gospel text this morning. They were traveling by boat across the Sea of Galilee at night and struggling against a strong headwind and waves that hindered their travel to the other side. In their distress, they may have even called out to the LORD to help them, but they were surprised when they saw their Savior coming to them walking on the sea. They were

frightened and cried out in fear. Peter was also afraid he was going to drown and cried out, "Lord, save me" (v 30). In both cases, despite their fear, Jesus came to them and calmed their fears by delivering them from danger.

We live in a world full of dangers, both real and imagined. When confronted by real dangers, reason tells us that we need to take the necessary precautions so that we are safe. For example, when a novel virus arises among us like COVID-19, we need to make appropriate responses, such as physical quarantine from other people and receiving the medical treatments prescribed by our physicians. But most importantly, we need to trust in Jesus, our Lord and Savior, and the promises He gives us in His Word and Sacraments. By His Word and Spirit, Jesus calls forth faith in our hearts so that, amid such dangers, we can boldly confess with the disciples, "Truly you are the Son of God" (v 33).

Our text begins with Jesus "immediately" sending the disciples off across the Sea of Galilee in a boat while He dismissed the crowd after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 (v 22). Jesus had just fulfilled the Scriptures concerning the prophet whom God would send, who would speak His words and perform mighty deeds among His people (Dt 18:15, 18; Mt 14:13-21). The disciples saw Jesus' miraculous deeds of healing the sick and feeding thousands, but once they were in the boat and

in danger, their faith in Jesus was tested. Our text says that, when they saw Him walking on the sea, they thought He was a "phantom," that is, an evil spirit, and they cried out in fear (v 26).

Peter was among the fearful disciples, but once Jesus identified Himself, he asked to join Him walking on the water. He stepped out in faith, and everything seemed to be going fine. "But," our text says, "when he saw the wind," that is, the waves blown by the wind, "he was afraid" and began to sink (v 30). Peter's faith in Jesus was replaced with fear of the dangerous waves, and he was no longer able to walk on the sea but began to sink.

We respond similarly to the disciples when our faith is challenged by fear. For example, when fear of the pandemic closed the churches, many people stopped coming to church, even after they reopened, and some people still have not returned. When fear of inflation makes us change our spending habits, some people not only cut back on variable expenses but also on their offerings for the Lord. And when fear of telling other people about Jesus overwhelms us, then our faith is often silenced. Fear hinders us from witnessing to Jesus as the Lord of our life in word and deed.

So, who is Jesus? Well, first of all, He is the Great "I Am," the LORD. When the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost and cried out in fear, Jesus said, "Take heart; it is I" (v 27). In identifying Himself to the disciples, Jesus uses the Greek words *ego eimi*, the same words used by the LORD to identify Himself to Moses at the burning bush: "I AM who I AM" (Ex 3:14). Jesus called on the disciples to take courage because their Redeemer God was with them, and He would deliver them from danger, even as the LORD redeemed Israel from their captivity in Egypt.

As "the Word become flesh" (Jn 1:14), Jesus was also co-Creator of the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything in it. Scripture often portrays the sea as the realm of chaos that opposes God's order, the dwelling place of the ancient serpent, God's adversary (Is 27:1; Amos 9:3). In a description of God's awesome power over everything, Job writes that God "trampled the waves of the sea" (9:8). In fact, because of its association with the devil, John writes that in the new heavens and the new earth there will be no more sea (Rev 21:1). Thus, Jesus' walking on sea not only demonstrates His divinity, but also His victory over the evil one.

As true God and true Man, Jesus hears our prayers and answers them. The disciples feared for their lives and cried out to God for deliverance, and Jesus responded to them with the

exhortation, "Do not be afraid" (v 27). When Jesus was on the mountain in prayer (v 23), he was aware of their distress on the sea. He heard their heart's prayer for help, and He "came to them walking on the sea" (v 25). So also, when we are in distress, the Spirit prays for us "with groanings too deep for words" (Ro 8:26), and God answers us with help according to His good and gracious will before we even vocalize the words.

Thus, in our text we see that Jesus calmed the disciples' fears by His word and deeds. The disciples' fear was calmed because the Lord Jesus had come to them, walking on the sea, and was present with them to deliver them from every evil. Indeed, Peter was even so bold as to ask to join Jesus walking on the sea. And when he began to sink because fear replaced his faith, Jesus reached out His hand and delivered Peter from drowning. And when Jesus and Peter "got into the boat, the wind ceased" (v 32).

So also, on the cross of Calvary, Jesus reached out His hands to deliver all people from every enemy. In Holy Baptism, we have been united with Christ by the Holy Spirit through faith and, as Luther writes, all our sins and evil desires have been drowned and died, and a new man daily emerges and arises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever (3rd Art.).

You see, the Scriptures teach that there is a proper fear. As the Teacher says in the Book of Proverbs, "The fear of the

LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." Jesus also tells us, "Do not fear the one who can only harm the body; fear rather the One who can condemn both your soul and body to hell." This is the fear of which Luther writes in his explanation of the First Commandment: "You shall fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

Dear Friends in Christ, dangerous situations in life test our faith, often producing fear and causing doubt. But Jesus asks, "Why did you doubt?" (v 31) He promises to come to us through His Word and Sacraments to calm our fears by assuring us that He is true God and able to save us in every need. By trusting in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, God conquers our fears and doubts and replaces them with saving faith and the sure and certain hope of eternal life; in Jesus' name. Amen.