

August 4, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Do Not Fear! The Lord is Near!

It had been a busy day. It began by Jesus and his disciples sailing east across the Sea of Galilee to get some rest. When they arrived at the other side, they were met by a crowd of thousands. Instead of complaining, Jesus had compassion on the crowd. He fed them spiritually by teaching them. Then he fed them physically by using 2 fish and 5 small loaves of bread. Everyone was satisfied as the day was coming to a close. Jesus told his disciples to get into the boat and go back to the other side of the lake. Then he sent the crowd home. Finally, Jesus was alone and he took the time to pray for hours. What a tremendous example for us. As the disciples pushed off from the shore with their bellies full of free food, they were in a good mood. They had no fears.

After sailing a short distance, a strong wind came up from the west. They could not use the sail and had to resort to rowing. They were rowing directly into the wind, which is like trying to walk up an escalator that is going down. For nearly eight hours they rowed and were only about 3 miles across the lake, about half way. They could not stop rowing or else the wind would quickly flip their boat over like what happened in Lake Michigan a few weeks ago and two people drowned. It was between 3 and 6 in the morning and the disciples were wet, cold, sleepy, exhausted, scared.

When Jesus finished praying, he started walking west, right into the blowing wind. When he got to the end of the shore, he kept walking ON THE WATER!! He was not walking along the shore or on a sand bar. He was walking on the water just like you can walk across the grass. My mind keeps spinning trying to figure out how this is possible. I simply have to admit that Jesus is God who created the world and is in control of the world. If he wanted to suspend the laws of physics, he could do that. How cool to know that our lifeguard can walk on water. He walked close enough to the disciples so that through the darkness and rain they could see a figure nearby. Since people don't walk on water, they jumped to the conclusion that they were seeing a ghost. (By the way, ghosts (that is, people coming back from the dead as spirits) do not exist.) Now that the disciples thought they saw a ghost, they were even more terrified and cried out in panic.

I doubt if you have ever been rowing a boat across the Sea of Galilee during a storm in the middle of the night, but I'm willing to bet that you have faced difficult situations where you can't seem to make any progress. You work and work and work and can barely keep up with the cost of living. Or, maybe, you lose your job. Oh no! Life feels like taking one step forward and two steps back. You have health problems that won't go away and when they do, another health problem comes along. Some trauma or accident comes along and takes the breath out of your lungs. You always feel that you are behind with things you should do and can't catch up. You tune into the news and see that political hatred has reached dangerous levels in our country still three months before the election. Meanwhile, other countries and terrorists are a continuing threat. Internally, we often struggle with insecurities and worries. Just like the disciples, we often face fears that are real and sometimes imagined. Is this the best that life is going to get, struggling from day to day? There are many times, maybe even now, when life feels like you are rowing into the wind, not making any progress.

Such earthly issues are like strong gusts of wind that keep pushing against us and make life difficult. But an even stronger gust of wind are the spiritual issues we face. From the moment of our conception, we were infected with a sinful nature. Think of it as a little demon inside of us that always wants to fight against God. Ever since the moment that, by God's grace, you were given faith, there is now a struggle going on inside your heart between that demon sinful nature and your spiritual nature. There is a constant struggle between doing the right or the wrong thing.

I was once taking a man through membership classes. When he came in he said, "I did not sin today." He was not bragging. He was trying to live a wholesome Christian life. That was good. He did not speed on the way to work. He did not lose his temper. He did not use any foul language. He thought he did not sin. In gentle love I asked him if he had prayed for missionaries that day, or if he had gone out of his way to help someone. You could see his face fall. That demon of a sinful nature was messing with him. If the demon could convince him that he did not sin then he would not see a need for Jesus.

Even on our best behavior days, we are still sinful. We may not do or say or think evil things, but we can become focused on ourselves and what we want without thinking of others and how we can help them or even praying for them. How many times have you seen others in a difficult

situation and thought, “Not my problem.”? How selfish. If you are not aware of that struggle between good and evil inside of you, if you do not recognize that you are sinful to the core, if you do not admit that there is room for improvement in your walk with God, then it’s time to be afraid. If you do not struggle against sin, then the winds of sin may be pushing you along and ready to capsize you eternally.

Try as we might, we can not make progress on our own against the stormy winds of sin. We can not live a life holy enough to impress God. We can not offer him anything that will make up for any sin. We are sinners and sin earns for us the strongest blast of a storm – death. We can not avoid it. It is coming for each of us. We can feel just like the disciples caught in the middle of storm, exhausted, helpless, doomed.

It is absolutely fascinating to me that as Jesus walked on the water, Mark tells us that he was about to walk past the disciples. Why would he walk past them? The Bible does not give us an exact answer, but here are some things we can note. Obviously, if Jesus wanted to avoid his disciples, he could have walked far enough away from them so they never saw him at all. On the other hand, if he walked directly at him, they could have recognized him right away. It seems to me that by walking past while being close enough to being seen, Jesus was teaching his disciples that even when they can not see him clearly, he is near. Jesus wants to be asked for help. He wants you to know that as you deal with the daily storms of life, he is right there. You do not need to fear. Jesus is near.

Notice Jesus’ amazing love for sinners. When he sent the disciples across the lake, he knew that a storm was going to be coming. He sent them into it because he knew that it was time to strengthen their faith even more. Mark tells us that (:52), “**they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were still hardened.**” Especially after the feeding of the 5000, the disciples realized that Jesus could perform miracles but it still had not fully sunk in that he was completely truly, 100% God in the flesh. He was in control of EVERYTHING in the world. They could call out to him for help whenever and wherever they were.

Notice, also, that Jesus does not yell at the disciples for being scared. Nor does he embarrass them for being so foolish to think they saw a ghost. No! IMMEDIATELY, he said (:50), “**Take courage, it is I. Don’t be afraid.**” He calmed them down and comforted them. He got into the boat with them. He used his Word to calm them down and to calm the storm.

God’s Word is where we can find the comfort and calm that we need in our daily lives. When we struggle with issues and forget to pray for God’s help, when our sinful nature wins another battle and leads us to selfish sin, when we consider the prospect of our own death, we need to hear our Savior’s voice. He could crush us, but he picks us up. Just as Jesus got into the boat with his disciples, he is involved in your life. Do not fear. Jesus is near.

Jesus was walking west, right into the face of the storm. He was there to help the disciples, but there was no one to help him. He faced the greatest storm of all as he hung on the cross. There he got blasted with the storm of God’s righteous wrath over every sin in the history of the world. Jesus faced that storm all alone, even forsaken by God. There was no one to help or rescue him, but he endured that storm. He absorbed all the punishment for all sin into his body and it killed him, but not before he could tell you that it was finished. The storm of God’s punishment for sin is over. Your sins are forgiven. Your guilt is gone. Then he came back to life again, proving that there is a glorious resurrection waiting for you too. Sorrow gives way to joy. Shame gives way to decency. Despair gives way to hope. Death gives way to life.

The disciples were soaking wet as Jesus saved them. You also were wet as God saved you. Through your baptism, your sinful nature was drowned. It no longer has control over you. You have the power of the Spirit to resist temptation. You have ability to live as the child of God that you are. You can endure difficulties knowing that they lead you to hang on to Jesus even tighter. You are able to live a holy life as you avoid improper words and actions. When sinful thoughts float into your mind, you can brush them aside. Through your baptism, you were connected to Christ. You do not have to face your struggles alone. Jesus wants you to ask him for help. Through the storms and struggles of your life, you may not always see Jesus clearly just like the disciples did not recognize Jesus right away. He might seem far away, but he’s not. He said, “Surely, I am with you always.” He calls out to you, “**Take courage, it is I. Don’t be afraid.**” You do not need to fear. Jesus is near. Amen.