

Pentecost 10, 8.9.202

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

“Take heart, be not afraid”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church!

“Call me if you need me. I’m always available.” Perhaps you have heard these words from a friend or co-worker. It’s very possible we have also said these words to someone. The only problem is that we’re not always available. When someone calls, I may be on the phone, or may be unable to answer because I am meeting with someone else. Or, perhaps you have tried to contact someone by email, only to get an automated response, “I’m away for two weeks; please leave me a message, and I’ll reply when I return.” The phrase “Call me if you need me” is a well-meaning phrase. The problem is that we are not always available.

In today’s gospel, Jesus’ disciples are in dire need of Jesus’ help, but Jesus told them to go ahead of him so that he could go to the mountain and pray. Jesus spent the day in prayer, and by evening the boat with his disciples was being battered by a storm of wind and waves.

The significance of this story is that Jesus came to the disciples when they needed him, and before they called for him. Jesus came *unbidden* to his disciples. Jesus said, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” Jesus came to his disciples where they were - *in a storm*. Jesus came to his disciples as they were - *in fear*. Jesus joined his disciples – *in a boat*. In a storm, in fear, in a boat: Jesus gave his disciples his presence of peace. Jesus didn’t give them advice about how to sail. He didn’t shame them for being fearful. Rather, Jesus gave his disciples his presence; the presence of Jesus replaced fear with faith and courage. Jesus said, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” With Jesus, the disciples could travel from storm into calm.

There are also people who don’t say, “Call me if you need me,” instead they come directly and unbidden to us. However, unlike Jesus, who gave no advice, those who come unbidden may attempt to help by offering all sorts of advice: “Peter, walk faster on the water.” “Peter, pretend you’re a fish!” “Peter keep your head down and ignore the wind.” The well-meaning and unbidden visitor comes with advice, trying to help. Unfortunately the unbidden visitor isn’t Jesus, and doesn’t meet us like Jesus does: where we are, as we are, remaining with us until there is calm. The unbidden visitor offers advice, and leaves us often feeling worse than before.

All of us have been well-meaning and unbidden visitors at some time, to someone. Telling someone what to do may make us feel better, but may not actually help the other person. Jesus came unbidden to the disciples, but it is important to notice that Jesus gave no advice to Peter and the disciples. Jesus only said, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” Jesus gave only his presence.

Jesus’ words, however, gave Peter faith and courage to act, because Peter called on Jesus to command him to go to him on the water. Jesus said, “*Come!*” And Peter actually got out of the boat in the storm! Peter got out of the boat to face waves and wind because Jesus’ presence awoke faith within him. Faith in Jesus caused Peter to act with faith. Jesus’ presence enabled Peter to do what seemed impossible, even foolhardy.

Yet when Peter noticed the strong winds, Peter became frightened and began to sink. Fear became self-doubt that caused everything to suddenly fall apart. Peter sank because of fear and doubt. In this story, fear is the powerful force of nature that leads to doubt. When has fear caused you to sink like Peter into self-doubt - doubt that Jesus is still with you in the storm?

After college, I went to Japan as a missionary. I had begun to sense the call of Jesus in my life, and had made the decision to “get out of the boat” of my Midwestern upbringing. I had heard the voice of Jesus calling me to serve his church in another land far away. To some around me at the time, it seemed impossible, even foolhardy. “Get out of the boat? Go to Japan? Are you mad? It’s a different language, culture, history - even different food! Why?” “Because Jesus said ‘Come and follow me.’”

I still remember the day I arrived at Narita International Airport in Japan. Before leaving Chicago, I had received a letter from Robert Cunningham, the president of the Lutheran missionary association in Japan. Bob welcomed me and told me that someone would meet me when I arrived. A second letter said I would be met at “TCAT,” the Tokyo City Air Terminal – all I needed to do was ride a bus from the airport to TCAT. The letter told me the bus number and which bus stop at which to board the bus to TCAT. It seemed easy enough, I thought. So after arriving in Japan, collecting my suitcase, and clutching that letter like a life preserver, I found the right bus, and verbally confirmed with the driver that it was going to TCAT. It was at that moment, in the wind and waves of a language that I did not yet understand that I was also overcome with fear and doubt.

Sinking like Peter into my seat on the bus, my heart sank even further down into the pit of my stomach. I suddenly thought, “Lord, what have you done? Where have you sent me? I’m not sure I

can do this. Help me.” I will never forget that moment of loneliness and fear. I am convinced that Jesus came to me on that bus, as I sank into my seat in fear, and loneliness. Yet Jesus remained with me, because when the bus arrived at TCAT, I was met by a group of missionaries would become friends and colleagues. Through them, Jesus had gone ahead of the storm and calmed everything with his presence. Jesus remained with me as a young missionary then, called me to seminary, and then to 25 years of further missionary service in Japan. Through all of that time, the wind, rain and storms came as they do in human life, but Jesus remained giving his calm presence and strengthening my faith.

I tell my story, because I am quite sure that each of us gathered today could also share stories of hearing Jesus’ voice in the storm, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” Jesus calls each of us to get out of the boat, to abandon ourselves to him and his cross, and follow him. Jesus never abandons us. We might abandon him; we might sink into fear and doubt, but Jesus remains with us, hidden in our suffering.

Paul writes “*Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” God’s grace through faith saves and frees us. Grace and faith free us so that we can go to Christ and follow him. This is the Christian journey. This is the way of the cross, which means traveling with Jesus through fear and suffering - knowing that Jesus has called us to follow him. Jesus will not abandon us in the wind and waves of life. It’s like the hymn: “Jesus calls us; o’er the tumult of our life’s wild restless sea, day by day his clear voice sounding, saying, ‘Christian, follow me’.”

I think one of the reasons most of us admire Peter is that we see a bit of ourselves in him. Peter tries, but also doubts and sinks. Peter is utterly human, but Peter never utterly fails, because Peter always grasps for Jesus’ hand. In his fear and doubt Peter realizes he needs Jesus, who says, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” A saint is not someone who never fails, a saint is someone who reaches out to Christ in the midst of the waves and storms of human life, again and again.

Like Peter, the prophet Elijah also feared for his life. Elijah said that he was being hunted down because he was zealous for the Lord. On Mt. Horeb the Lord was not in the wind, earthquake, and fire; Elijah heard God in the sound of sheer silence. Only in the calm of silence did Elijah hear God.

We, too, can hear Jesus calling over the tumult and noise of the world, but we will have to turn off our technology, the TV, silence the phone, ignore the news for a bit, and open ourselves to the

*good news* of God's kingdom already within us. Only in prayerful silence - silence so deep that we can feel our blood pulsing, hear our own breathing – do we hear Jesus' voice.

I am convinced that as modern people, the reason we find it so hard to hear God, is because we are so very distracted by the noise of the world – the wind and storm of life. So distracted that we don't notice Jesus or hear his voice: "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*"

Jesus has not left the world. God is not dead. It is us - we have become deadened to the life-giving silence and presence of God. Where are you on your human journey? How are you doing with the waves and wind of life? We are all struggling with the winds and waves of change. We are struggling with a pandemic, the resurgence of racism, nationalism, and poverty. We are fearful about the future in uncertain economic times as the waves of this pandemic continue to beat upon us, our families, and our world.

Jesus comes to us each day, meeting us in the winds of change and the fears of life. Jesus remains with us. Listen for his voice: "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*" This voice, and only this voice gives faith and courage to get out of the boat, so that we can walk with Jesus to a place of calm upon the sea of life. Amen.