

Pentecost 10A August 09 2020
Matthew 14:22-33
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

And they cried out in fear. Let's pray:

There was a time during my childhood when I was convinced that monsters lay in wait beneath my bed. I used to kiss my parents goodnight and then walk guardedly down the unlit hallway to my even darker bedroom. I'd then take a running leap onto my bed and tuck myself in deeply beneath the bedcovers where I'd be safe from the monsters lurking below. It didn't help that I also had a glow-in-the-dark skeleton that I'd won at the local show, suspended from my bedroom ceiling. I'd stare at it, terrified, and I was convinced that it moved around the room.

I've since outgrown those childhood fears but I haven't outgrown fear itself. I'm in the same boat as the disciples in today's gospel. And you are sailing with me.

My childhood monster stories haven't ended, they just changed. They became adulthood fears. We all have our fears. We all have our own stories. There are all manner of things that just haunt and frighten us.

We fear the loss of health, mobility, freedom. We fear the loss of security, success, reputation. We fear failure and what others will think about us. We fear being out of control and powerless. We fear stepping out into the unknown. We fear people who don't look or act like us. We fear others getting too close to us, knowing too much about us. We fear change. We fear our own death and the death of our loved ones.

Fear is a primary driver and controller of our lives. I see it in my own life and I see it in the lives of people I talk to. I see how it can paralyse us, distort our vision, and drown our lives.

Look around at world events and you'll see fear. It's the one thing both sides in any conflict have in common. Listen to the voices in your head and you'll hear fear. It's usually the loudest and most talkative voice. Listen to the news and you'll hear stories of fear. Study the scriptures and you'll find that the most common thing God says to you is: "Do not be afraid." And yet, most of us are. We're in the same boat as the disciples. We're tossed about by the storms of life. We see a ghost and cry out in fear.

If you feel the spectre of darkness encroaching on the world and the waves of life battering, torturing, and harassing you; if you row against the wind making no headway and find yourself alone, far from safe anchorage and dry ground, then you know what it was like for the disciples in today's gospel. You see ghosts, you quiver, and you cry out in fear.

The world today is crying out in fear. Some cry out with tears and screams of horror. Some cry out with silence. Some cry out through paralysis, not knowing what to say or do. Some cry out with rockets and bombs. Some cry out with political rhetoric and posturing. In whatever way we do it, at some point we all cry out in fear.

We cry out in fear because we want to be rescued from the situation of which we're afraid. We want to escape the storm and avoid the ghost. We want to be picked up and relocated to somewhere safe, peaceful, and comfortable. However, friends, Jesus doesn't come to the rescue that way. He didn't for the disciples and he doesn't for us. Instead, Jesus emerges, speaks, and comes to us from the very eye of the storm itself. He doesn't take us out of our storm, he enters it.

Jesus doesn't call up twelve legions of angels and come to our aid like some divine search and rescue team. Yet that's often what we expect. We're too easily convinced that solutions can only come from outside the situations themselves. That's the opposite to what today's gospel tells us.

Jesus came to the disciples walking on the water, through the wind, and in the darkness. Jesus' peace, words of comfort, and presence aren't

outside the storm but in the eye of the storm. So why don't we look for him there, in the midst of our fear? That's where Jesus shows up. Where else would we expect to find Emmanuel, God with us? If Jesus isn't in our storms and fears then he's not Emmanuel. He's not God-with-us.

I reckon we sometimes miss what's really happening in today's gospel. We see a gravity-defying, walking-on-water Jesus, but we miss the miracle.

The real miracle in this story is that Jesus walks on the tempests that brew and rage within us. The good news is that divine power and presence always has and always will, trample on and conquer human fear. It means that Jesus is Emmanuel. He is with us in the direst circumstances of our lives. The disciples didn't recognise this. Sometimes, we don't either. "It's a ghost," they screamed in terror. It's the only thing that made sense. People don't walk on water. It had to be a ghost. What else could it be? That's the power of fear to deceive and distort.

Now, I know it makes no sense us that the very elements that threaten our lives are the same elements from which new life comes. It's counter-intuitive. Yet, isn't that the way of the cross? Isn't that the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection? Isn't that the good news we so desperately want and need to hear? Isn't that what happened in today's gospel?

Our storms, our fears, are the place in which we abandon ourselves to God. Most of us, however, don't do that until we first feel abandoned by God. Surely that's how the disciples must have felt. Jesus made them get in the boat and cross the sea. They'd been abandoned to the open sea, the darkness, the waves, the wind, and their own illusions. They were abandoned to their own un-self-sufficiency so that they might abandon themselves to God.

The very elements that threatened to destroy the disciples became the environment in which they recognised Jesus as the Son of God. What they first feared as certain death they came to realise, cradled new life, hope, and salvation.

Saints, I was treated again to the power of this Gospel truth early this past week.

I had the privilege of visiting John Blackwell a second time in the Lyell McEwin Hospital on Monday. I could see that John was confused and scared and he asked me to tell him the truth. John asked me point blank, "Pastor, am I going to die?" I said, "Yes, John, you are going to die soon." Then I immediately consoled him by chatting to him about Jesus, new life, and heaven. I commended John's life to God, prayed for him, told him some jokes, and scratched his itchy back. When I saw that John's mind was at peace and he needed to sleep, I announced that I was leaving and said that I will visit him again in a couple of days. What he said next, as I left the room, melted my heart. John said, "Okay, Pastor. I'll wait here for Jesus to come by." John was comforted and consoled by his belief that his life was firmly in Jesus' hands and that Jesus would come and take him to heaven. John's storm had been stilled by God's promise, and he entered new, eternal life on Wednesday morning at 10:30.

Every time we cry out in fear Jesus comes to us saying, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." That's the invitation to abandon ourselves to God in the midst of our storms and fears. Indeed, it's hard to hear and heed those words when the waves are breaking, the wind is howling, and the ghost is approaching.

"Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." No matter how high the waves build, they are the waves on which Jesus walks to us. No matter how strong the wind blows, it is the wind through which Jesus walks to us. No matter how dark the night, it is the night in which Jesus comes to us. No matter how great our fear, it is the fear that Christ has already trampled on and defeated. No matter how scared we are of dying, it is through dying that we meet our sweet, gentle, loving Jesus, face to face.

"Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.