

“Why Are You So Afraid?”

In the name of him whose voice the wind and sea obey, dear friends in Christ: It had been a long day. The crowds began gathering very early, huge numbers of people flocking to Capernaum to see Jesus, the famous miracle working Rabbi from Nazareth. Fortunately for everyone involved, the city was located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. By using the beach as a natural amphitheater and by sitting himself in a boat with his disciples a little way from the water's edge, it made it possible for everyone who showed up to hear him while he taught the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. And teach them he did, from dawn until dusk – as we heard last week, mostly in parables; the voice of God coming to them over the water filling them with divine wisdom and truth. “The voice of God over the water” ... goodness, it almost sounds like Baptism again. I wonder why that keeps coming up. It's almost like it's important or something. But I digress. We're back with Jesus and the disciples in the boat. It had been a very long day ... but it was going to be an even longer night.

Nearing sunset, Jesus, weary from teaching all day, raises his hands to dismiss the crowds. I rather expect he gives them the Aaronic blessing, bidding them depart in the Lord's peace. Then he turns to his disciples and says, “Let's cross over to the other side.” To them it sounds like a great idea. The prospect of going ashore here and dealing with the press of people who want an audience with Jesus all night also – that would be too much. They set sail, turn the bow eastward, and off they go; a steady west breeze propelling them forward. A few other boats soon join in their wake. These must be the determined ones. They're not going to let Jesus get away that easy. The disciples understand their desire to be with Jesus, but they resent them just the same.

They soon forget them, however. They have a much greater concern. The Sea of Galilee is subject to violent squalls that can descend from the surrounding mountains suddenly and without warning. Most of the disciples are experienced sailors. They've been plying these waters as fishermen their entire lives. They know how to deal with rough weather. But nothing they've faced in the past matches the fury of the tempest they find themselves in now. The force of the wind is terrifying in its strength. The rigging strains and shakes. Shouted orders and replies are carried away by the howling wind unheard. Monster waves batter the sides of the tiny craft; the tops break well over the gunwales causing torrents to gush in. They bail as fast as they can to keep from being swamped, but it's a losing battle. Whatever cocky bravado the experienced hands had about handling storms deserts them. Panic ensues. We're gonna die. Right here. Right now. In the dark. In the cold water. We're all going to drown.

And through it all Jesus sleeps peacefully in the stern sheets as if he didn't have a care in the world. He's been so quiet they almost forgot about him. But now with imminent death upon them, they rouse him. There is anger in their voices as they ask accusingly, “What's the matter with you? Don't you care that we're about to perish?”

I need to pause here to point out a couple of things. The first is what exactly do they expect him to do? They're the trained sailors, not him. It's obvious from their reaction to what he does do that they weren't expecting that. So what is it that they want from him? Another pair of hands to bail water? They already know that's not going to help. Or is it that they just can't stand seeing him at peace and at rest while they're all active and panicky? A misery loves company sort of thing.

Second is the irony in their question, “Don’t you care that we are about to perish?” Think about it. The whole reason he’s here in the first place is his mission to save the world – to keep people from perishing. If they had the slightest inkling about how much he cared they’d know how insulting their question is. Granted, caught up in the moment and largely unaware of the destiny that awaits him, they aren’t thinking in these terms. Still, I have to believe it stung Jesus to have his closest disciples accuse him of not caring whether they perished.

Back to the narrative. Jesus now fully awake rises to his feet. It’s a difficult thing to do in the tossing boat. He’s got remarkable balance for a landlubber. But even more remarkable is what happens next. He rebukes the wind and says to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And it happens. The wind stops. It doesn’t slow down and come to halt. It just stops. And the surface of the sea is like glass. Not even a ripple. It’s so calm that I can almost imagine one of the perpetually complaining disciples thinking, “Oh great. Now we have to break out the oars and row to the other side.”

But now, having rebuked the wind and wave, Jesus has even sharper words for his disciples. “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” It’s worth noting that Jesus doesn’t use the usual word for fear that we most commonly find in Bible. The one Jesus uses here is better translated “cowardly”. It has a strong negative connotation. Fear isn’t necessarily a bad thing. There are times when it’s appropriate. But cowardice is always bad. It’s ignoble fear in the face of danger. It’s shameful dread of confronting the enemy, the kind that causes soldiers to break rank, abandon their duty, betray their comrades, and run in terror from the battlefield. That’s the kind of fear the disciples were displaying in the storm: cowardice. And Jesus rightly rebukes them for it.

And then we’re told they were filled with even greater fear. This time it is the Bible’s usual word for fear. And the thing to see is that it’s not the storm they’re afraid of, not any more. No, now they’re afraid of Jesus. It’s finally sinking into their heads just who it is they’re dealing with. When they ask, “Who is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?” they know that there can be only one answer to the question. This Jesus is none other than God Almighty. And they rightly fear God. They fear his power. As sinful men they fear his wrath and judgment – as well they should. This fear of the Lord is entirely a good thing. It is the beginning of wisdom. And Jesus does not rebuke them for it.

All this being said, I have to ask what is it that you fear? What in your life causes you to tremble deep inside? What keeps you up at night fretting? What do you fear with regard to your future? What violent storms loom on your horizon are you dreading having to face? Or maybe you’re in a storm right now that’s got you scared.

Those are my questions for you. This one comes from Jesus: “Why are you so afraid?” Luther in his Small Catechism explanation to the First Commandment, “You shall have no others gods”, says it means this: We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Note that a proper attitude toward God starts with fear. That’s important. And please don’t let anyone tell you that fear in this context doesn’t mean fear as in “be afraid”. Yes it does. Jesus himself said, “Don’t fear those who can destroy your body, rather fear him who can destroy both your body and soul in hell.” Our problem is that don’t fear God enough. If we had any notion about how offensive our sins are to the Lord, or how much peril of eternal hellfire we place ourselves in when we allow ourselves to willfully practice sin, we’d be a lot more careful about it. As it is we plunge ahead with the attitude, “What’s he going to do about it? Nothing; that’s what.” What’s more we treat the Gospel as a license to sin. “It’s okay if I do this because God loves me and for Jesus’ sake he forgives me.” We don’t have nearly enough fear of the Lord.

Instead we fear other things. We fear what people might think about us. We fear what may happen that would cause us to lose our health, our savings, our jobs, our homes. We fear what might happen to the people we love. We fear being left alone. We fear all the storms of life that we may have to face, some of which are very real and others will only ever exist in our imaginations. Still, we fear them. And when we do we're actually practicing idolatry. We make the things we fear false gods that we cower before because anything you fear more than the Lord is your god.

Did you ever think of that? That your worries and fears are forms of idolatry? And how puny and insignificant are some of the idols we make for ourselves in this way. Even the biggest ones are puny compared the Lord God Almighty who created the heaven and earth. And he's the one whom you offend by your fear of something else more than of him. That ought to make you very afraid – of God. And that's a good thing. That's the way it's supposed to be. Because if you fear the Lord as you should you're going to be ashamed of your idolatry. You're going to confess it for the sin that it is. And you're going to hear those sweet words of comfort, "For the sake of my Son whom I gave to bear your sin and be your Savior, you are forgiven."

And that's going to put a new perspective on things. You see, if you fear God as you should, you're going to see that there really is nothing else to be afraid of. I mean, do you imagine that he who went so far as to give his Son on the cross to save you from an eternity of suffering in hell hasn't got your best interests at heart in all the other matters of your life?

So please understand that the main lesson of this morning's Gospel text is not that Jesus is always going to calm all the storms in your life. That's not going to happen. The storms will come, and you will have to face them. The lesson we are to take from this account is that Jesus is with us in our storms. And they aren't bothering him. He's at perfect peace and rest. He's not panicking. Why not? It's because he has a proper fear of his heavenly Father. He fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things. And so when you find yourself in one of life's storms and feel the fear rising in yourself, listen to the voice of Jesus rebuking you, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? Why are you making this whatever it is your idol? Repent. Fear God and him alone. And you never need fear anything else." You too can ride out the storm in perfect peace and rest. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!