

### ***Facing Your Worst Fear***

In the name of him who is truly the Son of God, dear friends in Christ: To begin, I'd like to ask you a question: What are you *most* afraid of? What is it that you fear more than anything else? Take a moment to think about it ...

I'll bet if we were to take an informal poll, we'd get many different answers to that question. People have all kinds of fears. Some fear being seriously injured and left unable to work. Others fear losing their life savings and being left without means of support. Some fear losing a person dear to them: a spouse perhaps, or a child. Some have broad fears about the future, a general sense of angst about the way the economy is headed, the deteriorating state of politics, the decline of public morality, and international terrorism and the threat of weapons of mass destruction falling into terrorists' hands. Some fear something more personal, like a long buried, shameful secret coming to light and being revealed. Some fear getting caught for one of those "cold case crimes" and sent to prison. (And here you thought pastor was on vacation. He's actually fled to Brazil where he's in hiding under an assumed name. And yes, I'm just joking. ...Or am I?)

Anyway, there're plenty of things that people fear. But the one fear that all mankind shares in common, which indeed is the biggest fear on most people's list even if it isn't on the very top of yours, is *death*. For the vast majority of people death is the great unknown. It's the big mystery. They worry about what's on the other side – or even if there is another side. They worry about what fate might be awaiting them there. And they worry about the Day of Reckoning and what that will hold for them. Even for the majority of people who call themselves Christians, who supposedly have the answers to these questions, there's still plenty of fear. They wonder what it's going to be like in the judgment. They wonder if they'll have enough faith to stand with the righteous. They worry that maybe they'll lose their faith at their last moment – or maybe that they've believed the wrong things all along. And some, sadly, worry that they "won't be found worthy or good enough to be saved". If we're honest with ourselves, we'd probably have to admit that from time to time we too are plagued with doubt and fear about some of these same things.

And it's precisely to address these fears related to death and to lay them to "eternal rest" that we have been given the Gospel reading for today. It's the familiar story of Jesus walking on the water, which you've got to agree is a pretty impressive stunt. If nothing else, it showcases Jesus' divine power and his mastery over the forces of nature; in this case: gravity. But we'd be making a big mistake if that's all we understood the story to be: a miraculous display by which Jesus reminds us that he really is God. I mean, if you've read this far into Matthew's Gospel (chapter 14) and haven't figured that out yet ... well, let's just say you've not been paying attention. No, it's important to understand that the miracles of Jesus always have a teaching point. And in this particular case, what I'd have you see is that the whole thing is set up to be an elaborate metaphor for death.

Why do I say that? There are several reasons. First there's the water crossing. What we find in the Scriptures is that they consistently use the crossing of a body of

water to mark the ending of one way of life and the beginning of another. For example, when Abraham was called out of the pagan lands of the east to go as God's chosen man to the Promised Land, he had to cross the great river Euphrates. He's even called Abraham *the Hebrew* after that, a word that literally means "one who has crossed over." Another example is when the Israelites left Egypt. Remember how they passed through the Red Sea leaving their lives of misery and bondage to reemerge on the other side as God's free people. It was the beginning of a new life for them. It's not a coincidence that we begin our new lives in Christ by "passing through" the water of Baptism. That's when we leave behind the slavery of sin and death and become God's free children in Jesus. Okay, now remember how it happened later, after forty years of wandering in the desert wasteland – after spending a *lifetime* there, as it were – that the Israelites crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. It's a picture, you see, of how we will all one day cross over "the river" leaving behind our lives in the desert of this world to go home to heaven. And it just so happens that the Sea of Galilee, the setting for today's Gospel, is situated in the same deep valley that the Jordan River runs. It's just farther upstream. And the disciples are attempting to cross it from the east, that is, the desert wasteland "worldly" side toward the Promised Land "heaven" side. All of which points to the crossing representing death.

Another tip off is that the story takes place at night. It's the hour of darkness and the fear of what can't be seen. Darkness speaks of gloom, sorrow, and the grave. Now add to the picture the fact that the wind and waves are against the disciples. Visualize them struggling, straining at the oars, and making very little headway if any. It's a picture of the soul and body in peril; their labored breaths are like the gasps of a person fighting for life. Add too the fact that Jesus is not visibly present with them. Here in their time of deepest need they don't see him. It suggests that time near the end when the soul finds itself all alone searching for some sign of God and not finding him. And then, when Jesus finally is seen, they are terrified, thinking him to be a ghost – again, something that suggests death.

So, like I said, there's a lot in this story that suggests it's an illustration of death. And if you're able to see that, then let me suggest that the boat that they're all in is like the church. It's the vessel in which God's people make the passage from this life into the next. It's what keeps us spiritually alive and out of the water – which is death. Meanwhile Jesus, as we heard, has gone up alone on the mountain to pray. It's a picture of his ascension into heaven. He rises up to intercede for his people while he sends his followers across on their voyage without his visible presence. So really, the whole scenario illustrates the present age: the church struggling along against the contrary currents of the world, the winds of opposition, and waves of persecution, as it carries those inside to the eternal Promised Land. Jesus (who has ascended into heaven) is with them; but not seen. And so the faithful few press on together through the long night of this age. We are weary from our hard labor as we battle the elements to keep the boat moving in the right direction. And despite all our work, it usually seems like we're not making much progress. Most of the time we're frantically bailing water just trying to keep afloat. Meanwhile the winds increase in fury and the waves grow higher and more daunting provoking all kinds of scary thoughts and frightful worries to develop in the minds we who are in the boat.

And that's when Jesus comes to us – in our time of need and fear – and tells us to take heart and not be afraid. He is with us. He is always with us in the church. And of course, it's telling that he appears walking on the water – the water that represents

death – because it demonstrates his mastery over it. He can stand on death because it has no power over him. He defeated death by his death on the cross for our sin. As a matter of fact, one of the other evangelists who relates this same story says that when Jesus appeared walking on the lake, he was acting as if he would pass the boat on by and just keep on going to the other side. It's a picture of how he made the first crossing through death alone when he went to Calvary for us, and how on account of it, the way is safe for the rest of us.

And one day, by God's grace, the whole boat will arrive on the far shore. That will happen when the end of this age comes, and the Lord creates a new heaven and a new earth – one that hasn't got this scary sea of death in it any more.

But until that day comes when the whole church safely reaches the Promised Land, there will be times when Jesus calls certain persons as individuals to step out of the boat and come walking to him on the surface of the water. That's what Peter's little walk on the sea pictures: the death of person who is in the church. And unless the end of the age comes first, there will come a day when Jesus will ask *you* to step out of the boat too. Therefore, learn from Peter's example. Everything was fine for him as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus – and specifically on Jesus who was showing that he had defeated death. It was only when he began to look around and think about the frightening wind and waves that he began to sink. That's when death began to get the upper hand. And though he's been criticized for it (and rightly so) at least he knew on whom to call when he got himself into trouble. His short prayer, "Lord, save me!" has got to be one of the finest prayers ever spoken. I commend it to anyone who finds themselves in the same situation. When it's your turn to step out of the boat and you're walking in that unnatural place between life and death, if you too become overwhelmed with fear and doubt and feel yourself starting to sink, you have only to utter those same words and Jesus will be there to take your hand and lift you back up to the surface where he is.

But the point is that having learned from Peter's example, that shouldn't happen to you. Jesus was right to rebuke Peter for his lack of trust. If you keep your focus and faith on Jesus and the forgiveness you have in him, you won't start sinking. You'll calmly and steadily walk straight into his arms. With your heart and mind fixed on Jesus, you won't have anything to fear.

But this raises another issue. Pastor notes that not too infrequently he's come across firmly grounded Christians who sincerely believe in the salvation they have in Jesus Christ. They know the One in whom they trust, they know that their sins have been forgiven, and they eagerly look forward to the day of their death when they will be welcomed into the company of saints and angels in heaven. They pray for it to come soon. Because of Jesus, they don't fear death; but some of them are nevertheless very afraid. And what they fear is *living*. It usually happens with folks who are a bit older. Maybe they have health problems, their finances are getting tighter, it's becoming harder for them to do things, they feel useless and worn out. They don't like the feeling that they are becoming a burden to others. Their spouse and most of their friends have already passed on. They feel lonely. And all of this adds together to make their lives quite unhappy and uncomfortable. And this can give rise to fear: the fear of facing another day, the fear that the Lord has forgotten them or that maybe he's angry with them and that's why he hasn't taken them home yet, the fear of losing the faith in the midst of all the unhappiness if it continues, the fear that their increasing anger and

frustration with their situation might be a sin that can't be forgiven. I'm sure you get the idea. There's no end to the kinds of fears Satan can suggest to people to get them to dwell on. He's "devilishly" good at it.

So, what I'd have you see is that today's lesson designed to eliminate our fear of death is equally helpful in relieving these sorts of fears as well. Really, it addresses *all* our fears. You see, by taking on mankind's worst fear, death, and showing his complete mastery over it, Jesus demonstrates how little we have to fear of anything short of it. I mean, if the big fear is gone, why should we fear the little things? If we trust him with providing us eternal salvation through our deaths, how much more should we trust him in time throughout our lives?

I asked you at the beginning of this message what it is that you fear the most. Now I want you to ask yourself, "Why?" Is it because you're looking at the wrong thing? Stop looking at the wind and the waves. Face your worst fear by turning your face toward Jesus. Look at him. Hear him say to you, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Invite Jesus into the boat. And the wind will cease; for truly, he is the Son of God. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***