

SERMON – *Faith over Fear*

Sunday, March 15, 2020 – Living Grace Lutheran Church, Hawley MN

Gospel Announcement: The holy gospel is according to... **Glory to you, O Lord.**

Scriptures: Romans 8:12-17; Psalm 27; and Matthew 14:22-33

Hymns: *My Faith Looks Up To Thee* #759; *What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine* #774; *When Peace Like a River* #785 (*Communion*); and *Day by Day* #790.

Gospel: Matthew 14:22–33 Jesus Walks on Water

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Gospel Proclamation: The gospel of our Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

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SERMON

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." - 1 Cor. 1:3

On May 3, 1913, five California entrepreneurs invested \$100 each to set up America's first commercial-scale liquid bleach factory. In 1914, they named their product Clorox® bleach. And so we began using bleach to clean everything...over the years people realized there was one BIG problem with Clorox Clean-Up® cleaner ...some people felt like they need to wear "battle fatigues" when cleaning with Bleach because of potential splash-back on their clothes. This made cleaning a real event vs. something people could do in the flow of normal life. Fast-forward....Denise Garner, Chief Innovation Officer at Clorex led the team to develop Clorox disinfecting wipes...a way to address a popular product, but it had a few flaws. It was 20 years ago that the company introduced Clorox® disinfecting wipes to the world and created a new category beloved by opportunistic cleaners everywhere and has become a leading product in their Clorox brand today.

Now there is a run on Clorex wipes, along with other disinfectants around the globe. We survived without them for years...but in our country of convenience, we are panicking this week if we are not armed with hand sanitizer, Clorex wipes, paper towels, and toilet paper...We have let fear grip us – some may be warranted....some may not be.

So this morning we heard from hymn writers and God's Word....God's in the midst of our fears and sorrows...as we come in prayer, let us remember where and who to trust in times like these....and it's not putting our hope in Clorox wipes...while they do have their benefits, our gospel text offers us a more life-giving focus this morning, especially in light of our current Coronavirus pandemic.

Here are the images, I would invite you to focus on:

Prayer:

Even in a very uncertain situation... Jesus takes the time to pray. This is a reminder that things are never so turbulent or so urgent as to take us away from the necessity of prayer. Why did he need to pray – because just before this story in chapter 14...Jesus' friend John the Baptist was

murdered, then he tried to get away to a quiet place but the crowds followed him...so he had compassion on them, and healed them...and when it came time to eat, the crowd of 5,000 was fed with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread by Jesus and his disciples. And now he dismisses the crowd, tells the disciples to go on ahead and goes up the mountain to pray. We learn from Jesus, there is never a bad time to pray!

Jesus sends the disciples out!

He sends them in a boat and tells them to go ahead to the other side of the lake...they had work to do – he was giving them permission to go do it. Even in the midst of unknown times, we have work to do. What does that work look like? Just yesterday, as we sat together for the Congregational Life and Outreach meeting, the question of what do we do at a time like this? Well, we would have discussed dropping off spring baskets to shut-ins and everyone was throwing up there hands in wonder. I offered to make enough cards if someone else would help write in them and get them out in the mail. A simple gesture to people we can't see because the nursing homes, understandably, are in lockdown modes. How can we best be a loving, caring neighbor during a time like we are in?

We will encounter choppy seas!

The reality is that when we set out on life...and set out on Christ's mission, we will often find ourselves in troubled waters. Jesus does not abandon us but rather comes to us, as he came to the disciples, when we need him most. Life is not going to be smooth sailing...there will be choppy seas for sure!

The image of the disciples, who because of their fear, could not recognize Jesus when he came to them in ways they never expected... such as walking on the water. All of the disciples are panicky by the turbulent waters and by this figure – whom they don't recognize – walking towards them in the early morning hours. Are there times we don't recognize Jesus? Times when he is very much present with us – and yet we are blind to his love for us, blind to trusting him or blind to his grace for us? Blind to his presence among us?

Focusing on Christ is neither a natural reaction nor an easy one. Our instinct is to dwell on the situation at hand, searching for solutions or stewing over the pain and difficulty. As a result, troubles look scary and overwhelm us with a sense of defeat. However, fear and defeat cannot live long in a heart that trusts the Lord.

Peter panics!

With stormy waters swirling around, Peter panics. He has a moment of trust and says, *"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water"* (vs.28). When Jesus commands Peter to *"come,"* Peter steps out of the boat in faith – because he has a relationship with Jesus. He embarked on that journey across the water in faith, he then became frightened, but the strong arm of Jesus lifts him up and returns him to the boat.

We are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are called to be faithful to the call of Christ. Jesus says to his disciples: *"Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid."* "Another way to translate Jesus' words to the disciples is, *"have courage"* – his words are in the present tense!

The root meaning of the English word "courage" is from the Latin word *cor* and the French word *coeur* (*KUR*)" meaning heart," which may explain that English translations vary between *"take heart"* and *"take courage."* What is Jesus saying to Peter, to his disciples?

I wonder if Jesus is saying to them, and to us: **faith means living out of your heart.** You are going to have to lead, live, and love with your heart. You know who I am. Deep down in your heart, you know me and you know I will be there. Trust yourself. Trust your heart. Jesus' words

call Peter back to himself to his truth, to his heart, to his faith. And no valiant feat is necessary to verify what Jesus wants Peter to see or for Peter to find out the truth about his own faith.

Peter thinks he can walk on water. What will that prove, anyway? Perhaps Peter thinks that if shows an act of courage, he will have faith. Perhaps Peter wonders if he will convince himself of Jesus' promises if he thinks big. Maybe Peter will believe in himself if he is able to do what Jesus does.

When the disciples cried out in fear: *“Lord, if it is you ... Is it really you, Jesus? We need to know. How can we really trust that you will be with us always, to the end of the age?”*

And perhaps Jesus' answer would be something like, *“Well, it's certainly not because you will be able to walk on water, if that's what you are thinking, Peter.”* Jesus is not saying *“buck up, be brave, Peter.”*

Stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will NOT face troubled waters or be filled with fear – but it is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, that when we need it most, he will extend his arm to lift us up and get us back in the boat. Jesus is extending an arm to us this day. Jesus knows we are filled with fear, we see the stormy waves around us – searching and wondering what to do? What will become of us? How long can the pandemic last? And Jesus says...I'm here for you.

Focus on the image of Jesus calming the troubled waters for the disciples and the reality that he can calm our troubled waters as well. Jesus doesn't actually rebuke the winds, he just shows up – and holds Peter hand. When they got back into the boat, the wind ceased. Jesus and the reign of God have power over the forces of nature and can conquer our fears and the evil that causes them.

God assures us that if we get out of the boat, we can count on Jesus, our Lord and Savior accompanying us in our journey. If Peter had not obeyed the call to walk on water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognizing Jesus and being rescued by Jesus.¹

Friday evening as I was hearing the national news become more panicky, I walked into my bedroom and sticking out of the stack of books was this book that caught my attention. *Trade Your Cares for Calm* by Max Lucado. I opened it up and came to this devotion titled “Relinquishing Control.”

When we can't sleep, don't count sheep – read Scripture. Distinguish between God's voice and the voice of fear. Worry takes a look at catastrophes and groans, “It's all coming unraveled.” God says, “Every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.” (Romans 8:28 MSG). Worry claims “The world has gone crazy.” God's Word disagrees: “Jesus has done it all and done it well (Mark 7:37 MSG).” Worry wonders if anyone is in control. God's Word calls God “the blessed controller of all things” (1 Tim. 6:15 Phillips). Worry whispers this lie: “God doesn't know what I need.” God's Word declares: “God will take care of everything you need.” (Phil. 4:19 MSG). Worry never sleeps. God's children do. The formula is simple: perceived control creates calm. Lack of control gives birth to fear. Anxiety increases as perceived control diminishes. So what do we do? Control everything? Never board a plane without a parachute. Never enter a restaurant without bringing your own clean silverware. Never leave the house without a gas mask. Never give away your heart for fear of a broken one. Some people face anxiety by taking control. If only we could. Yet, certainty is a cruel imposter. A person can accumulate millions of dollars and still lose it in a recession. A health fanatic can eat only nuts and veggies and still battle cancer. A hermit can avoid all human contact and still struggle with insomnia. We want certainty, but the only certainty is the lack thereof. That's why the most stressed out people are control freaks. They fail at the quest they most pursue. We

¹ Pastor William Willimon may have put it best in a sermon titled *How will you know if it's Jesus:*

can't take control because control is not ours to take. The Bible has a better idea. Rather than seeking total control, relinquish it. You can't run the world, but you can entrust it to God.

Appropriate words for this day...we can't run the world, but we can trust God. I love to see how many times words appear in scripture so I went looking: the word *fear* appears 512 times in the Bible. It is nothing new. Fear has existed for a long time. However, three other words also appear in scripture. The word *trust* appears 198 times; *courage* appears 198 times. And the word *faith* appears 529 times in scripture. Trust, courage and faith...trumps fear. Are we putting our trust and faith in Clorox wipes and antibacterial hand gel – or are we putting our faith in God?

Perhaps this week's international and national health concerns are testing us and taking us to deeper faith. If you want to get close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out in the sea, you have to trust his promises, through risk and venture.

The last image we see in this text is that the disciples respond to Jesus' saving grace through worship and confession "Truly you are the Son of God" – vs. 33. The disciples worship Jesus and confess their faith to him about him! It is the last of many images that show us God's love, Jesus Christ's saving grace in the times of uncertainty and assurance that Christ's love and companionship are there when we need it the most. During these uncertain times, we worship Jesus. It's not about sitting at home watching the cascading downfall of news of another case of Coronavirus – but it's about opening up our Bibles, reading God's Word, Worshipping God for all that we do have...the technology to know there are viruses, the medicine and technology to help sick people, the knowledge to know what can be done to help curb diseases. Let us open our hearts and minds to God's Word in hearing that it is through God, the troubled waters are calmed around us.

Let us pray...for those who are sick and their families, for those who are living in fear and anxiousness, for the professionals who are providing medical care, for those working on treatments and a vaccine for COVID-19, and for our leaders to act with wisdom and courage as they make vital decisions that impact each of our lives. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ. Amen. (Philippians 4:7).