

Weekend of Sunday, August 9, 2020
10th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 19/Proper 14/Year A
First Reading: 1 Kings 19:9-18
Second Reading: Romans 10:5-15
Gospel Reading: Matthew 14:22-33
Sermon Title: “Take Heart, Do Not Be Afraid”

Theme

Matthew’s gospel typically portrays Jesus’ disciples as people of “little faith,” who fail despite their best intentions. In this story, Matthew shows how Jesus comes to the disciples when they are in trouble and sustains them in their time of fear and doubt.

Text

²²[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee], while he dismissed the crowds.²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear.²⁷ But 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.”²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Sermon

Last weekend and early this week, "Tropical Storm Isaias" hammered the east coast with gusts as high as 147 mph and winds that spawned tornados that killed at least six people and causing millions in damage. We have had hurricanes that don't do as much damage.

Then last Tuesday there was a massive explosion in Beirut, Lebanon. You probably all saw the numerous cell phone and other videos that illustrated the massive impact and resultant damage.

Those two recent images came to mind when I read the First Reading in which Elijah was visited by the LORD God on Mt. Horeb and the very presence of God caused a great wind that broke rocks, and after the wind, an earthquake, and after the earthquake, a fire!

I am lucky I guess, because I have never experienced any of those things to the extent that Elijah had, but I wouldn't be surprised if some of you have experienced one or more of them.

This theme of storms and impending disaster continued in the Gospel reading. It was the evening of that amazing miracle, the Feeding of the Five-Thousand. Remembering that Jesus was trying to find a solitary place to mourn the execution of his cousin John, he was descended upon by thousands of folks who sought him out to heal their sick and to hear him preach and teach and encourage and inspire. You know how the story went, it got late, the Disciples asked him to send the people away because they had to be hungry. Jesus said they didn't have to go away and told the Disciples to give them something to eat. They had little, just a few loaves and fish, and yet when Jesus brought God's blessing upon what they had and gave it back to the Disciples to distribute all were filled and they had more leftover than they started with. Such is the abundance of God.

Well then, after all were fed, Jesus told the disciples to go to the other side of the lake and he would meet them later. You see Jesus still needed that time to be with God his Father and mourn the loss of his cousin, John.

Presumably, he did that. But while he was doing that a storm arose. Matthew recorded that the Disciples, who were in a boat in the middle of the lake, were battered by waves and far from land when they saw a vision of a man walking toward them. It is about the man walking toward them amid the waves in the middle of the lake that Matthew wrote, they were terrified because they thought it was a ghost. Jesus said simply, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Now let's put you in the boat, a perfectly good seaworthy boat. Even if it was a dark and stormy night, and the eery figure you saw walking on the water toward you turned out to be Jesus, why would you ask Jesus to call you out of the boat?

That's what Peter did. Apparently, Peter wanted to test Jesus, or test his faith in Jesus. Either way, Peter, not Jesus, failed the test. And while that interaction that is the second half of the Gospel Reading, would be great sermon material alone, I feel the Spirit calling me to preach about Jesus' exhortation to the Disciples, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

If I had a children's message, I might tell them that Raisin and the Bar are afraid of the dark and they take comfort in seeing the red sanctuary candle all night because it reminds them that Jesus is always with them. And then I might ask the children what they are afraid of, and likely I would hear, darkness, loud noises, monsters, ghosts like the disciples, and so on. My grandson Elliott, has a reoccurring nightmare that includes a fantasy of his imagination that he calls "Dirt Hand." We've asked him about it but he's so scared about it that he doesn't want to talk about it. Children have irrational fears. Irrational because monsters and ghosts and dirt hands don't exist in reality.

Linguists tell us that the opposite of fear is faith. So if we are "faithful" meaning full of faith, then why do we have fear? I submit to you that most of the time, when people speak of "fears" they are either irrational fears also known as phobias, or they are *concerns*. Most of us have rational concerns like loss of health and well-being of self and loved ones; losing a job, etc. Could those happen? Yes, and they do all the time. Those situations are cause for concern.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Today most of us have plenty to be concerned about, don't we? Collectively as the citizens of the world and this nation we are concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic and how we as individuals respond and respect each other. We are concerned about our families and ourselves as individuals. Will we or our loved ones become afflicted and what could that mean? We ought to be concerned about the economy and the pandemic's effect on jobs that provide livelihoods for our families.

Those who are involved in education are concerned. Whether as teachers and school employees or parents and students, we are concerned about what method of education will serve our children and the community best.

I have been profoundly affected by the racial tension in our country in the last few months and I am concerned about how all Americans can move forward so that all benefit from this great country we live in.

I could go on but that would probably just weigh you down rather than lift you up, which is ultimately my goal. Let me take this opportunity to state the obvious that sometimes gets pushed into the backs of our minds, and that is that we have a God in Jesus Christ, who went through far worse than we will ever be subjected to and *by faith* in God his Father, came through to receive the glory that he was due.

He remains with us through the Holy Spirit, and the first reason we gather every week is to continue to give him the glory. The second reason is to hear the Gospel preached and learn from it and be encouraged and inspired by it.

All of us are relying on experts in their fields to make the best decisions they can regarding activity amid the pandemic. And some are working on vaccines and treatments. I pray for them, do you? I hope so. Whether they are godly people or not, God is using them to save the world. God revealed in Jesus Christ has not stopped caring and saving. God revealed in Jesus Christ continues to care and save today.

So you have concerns. So do I. There is nothing wrong with rational concern. Think of these times as opportunities to grow deeper in faith. Metaphorically

speaking, stay in the boat or get out of the boat. I don't care. Obviously, Jesus didn't either. What he exhorted Peter and the rest to do is "Take heart, do not be afraid." God the Father who has the power to make the wind blow so hard is can break rocks; Jesus Christ who demonstrated he has the power over life and death; and the Holy Spirit who guides and directs and inspires us throughout our life is with us. Who can stand against us?

"Take heart, do not be afraid."

Prayer

Creator of Life, you desire for us to have life abundantly. An abundant life if a full life and sometimes that includes times of fear and concern. Help us to see them as opportunities to grow deeper in faith, and guide us through the troubled times with care and with the confidence that you are present with us and will see us through to the other side. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen