

Pentecost 10
8/9/20

Sermon
by Rev. Arthur F. Sonnenberg

Text: Mt. 14:22-33

It is reported that the journalist H.V. Morton - somewhere in his writings about his 1930's travels in the biblical lands - makes a comment to the effect that the people of ancient times did not share the love of the sea which more modern folk have. That, I suspect, is largely an accurate assessment. It is doubtful that you could find too many in those days who would have penned words like the poet John Masefield did in 1902 when he wrote *Sea-Fever*, inspired by his earlier experiences as a sailor. Some of you may remember the poem from your literature class in school. Each of the three stanzas begins with the exclamation, "*I must down to the seas again...*" And he revels so much in the thought of being on the water that he writes:

*"And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying."*

A very romantic view of the sea!

But, in ancient times - with the exception of a few sea-going peoples, I suspect it is safe to say that most folks were wary of traveling over great expanses of open water, whether on the Mediterranean Sea or one of the oceans.

This wariness about the open water was certainly true of the people of Israel. In their minds, large bodies of water were associated with chaos. Indeed, as one reads the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, one immediately notes that the original state of things there is not utter nothingness but rather water everywhere: "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*" (Gen. 1:1-2) And their fears were often justified by reports of what happened to travelers on the Mediterranean. For example, the New Testament tells of the apostle Paul being shipwrecked no less than four times during his ministry!

The people of Israel *did* do somewhat better on an enclosed body of water such as the Sea of Galilee. Approximately thirteen-plus miles long from north to south and seven-plus miles from east to west at its widest point, on a clear day one can usually see the opposite shore fairly easily. That is why fishermen like Simon Peter, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, plied their trade working out of Capernaum located almost at the top of the sea.

Nevertheless, even a body of water like the Sea of Galilee - a mere puddle compared to even the smallest of our Great Lakes, could still hold its terrors on occasion. Here's why:

The surface of the Sea of Galilee is about 680 feet below sea level. That makes it the second lowest place on earth. (The *lowest* place, incidentally, is the Dead Sea, over 87.5 miles as the crow

flies further south, separated by the Jordan River. *That* body of water is about 1,412 feet below sea level.)

Back to the Sea of Galilee. The climate at the sea of Galilee is usually semi-tropical, rather pleasant. However, the sea is surrounded by high mountains. The Galilean hills on the west side reach nearly 1,400 feet above sea level, and the mountains to the east side - now called the Golan Heights - reach over 2,500 feet above sea level. There is - as you might imagine - quite a temperature differential between the sea and the highest parts of the surrounding mountains. Especially when the wind is from the east, the cool dry air from the mountains swoops down to the lake meeting the warm moist air on the lake, and as the two different air masses clash they can very quickly stir up violent storms, causing great consternation, if not abject terror, even among those used to the lake.

That was the situation the disciples of Jesus faced late one evening in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. They had been sent across the lake by Jesus who - after a long and strenuous day surrounded by the crowds to whom he had ministered - desired to be by himself to pray. Now, here they were at night in the midst of the Sea of Galilee, finding themselves battered by waves and high winds that had suddenly arisen. It was a very intimidating situation for them, to say the least!

Now, at first glance it may seem difficult for us to relate to this situation, to know how unnerving it could be, unless we have traveled on other bodies of water in similar circumstances. However, while we may not have experienced the terrors of a literal storm on a dark night at sea in a relatively small boat, just about all of us have had to face - and perhaps even now are facing - storms in our lives that hold just as many fears or terrors in their *own* way as those on the water.

And they can strike suddenly and unexpectedly. Back in February, my wife and I flew to Illinois to visit our son and his wife in a suburb about 26 miles out of Chicago where they had recently purchased a house. We arrived on the 14th and planned to return back here on the 18th. On the morning of the 16th I had a cup of coffee and my son - who enjoys cooking a lot - made all of us a nice break-fast. Shortly afterward, I poured myself another cup of coffee and as I was standing at the counter adding some cream into it, I suddenly felt a bit odd - slightly nauseous and tired at the same time. I thought to myself, "You'd better sit down." As soon as I sat down at the counter, I thought, "You'd better put your head down for a moment," which I did. In the next probably ten or fifteen seconds, I seemed to be going in and out of consciousness. My daughter-in-law quickly noticed this, and she called my wife from the living room area. And as soon as my wife saw what was happening, I heard her say to my son, "Call 911!" He did so, and within five or six minutes an ambulance and a fire truck arrived, and I was soon on my way to the hospital located in the next town over. After a stay in the emergency room, I spent the rest of that day and the next

two in the hospital. They took a lot of tests but it was uncertain what caused the problem. They regulated some of my medication and we finally flew home on February 20.

Now the point of the matter is not so much what may or may not have been wrong, but rather how quickly things got kind of dicey. As I described it later to someone, except for a cold that I had had for a few days, I was basically feeling okay until suddenly I wasn't.

Some of you have undoubtedly faced similar situations. A sudden illness or an accident occurs and what is normal, usual, and routine is - in a moment - turned into a crisis. The death of a loved one has a similar effect, often even when it is expected. And if it's not that, it could be the loss of job, a financial crisis, or some turn of events that you never dreamed would occur. How many of us before around the middle of March would have imagined that the whole country - and many others worldwide - would be dealing with the life-changes caused by COVID 19? In situations like those I have mentioned, life seems chaotic, uncertain, unpredictable, alien, and sometimes just plain frightening.

A depressing state of affairs, to be sure! But it also brings us to some very good news. For, in the midst of the storms which buffet us, we may be sure that Christ our Lord is present beside us. The disciples found that to be true as they struggled on the sea that stormy night that we read about in today's Gospel. In the midst of being battered by the waves on the sea, you will remember, they saw a figure walking toward them upon the water. Our text tells us that the thought it was a ghost and they were terrified. But their fears were soon allayed as Jesus called to them saying: *"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."*

Throughout the centuries which have followed multitudes of Christians have found that same presence with them in the storms they faced. They have found that Christ's promise, *"Lo, I am with you always..."* has been gloriously true. John Wesley - who served God in a long and fruitful ministry - died on March 2, 1791. It is said that not long before his death, he opened his eyes, and gathering up his remaining strength, said: *"The best of all is, God is with us."*

It is possible to face a great deal in life if we can just be sure that there is someone out there who is facing it with us, someone who understands what is happening, someone who we can trust, someone who will not let us go, come what may. Our gospel for this morning assures us that that Someone is Jesus Christ and that we can rely upon him fully. *"Take heart, it is I,"* he says in a calm, clear voice, *"Do not be afraid."*

But there is even more good news for us in this story. It comes to us out of Peter's experience. After he recognizes that the figure walking on the water is, indeed, Jesus, he is inspired to try to walk in faith... literally. So he calls out to Jesus saying, *"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you"*

on the water." Jesus does not try to dissuade him. Instead, he welcomes the request. "Come," he says. The text tells us what happens next: "So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus."

Here we see that Jesus encourages Peter boldly to believe and to act on that belief. Jesus – we can see – wants his followers to have a robust, vibrant faith, not a timid one that barely inches along.

It's something like this: During the 19th century, there flourished one of the greatest tightrope walkers who ever lived. He was a Frenchman by the name of Jean-François Gravelet – usually known by the name Charles Blondin. Seeing Niagara Falls during a visit, it became a goal of his to walk across the roiling Niagara Gorge just past the falls on a tightrope. This came to pass for the first time on June 30, 1859 on an 1,100 foot long, three-inch-thick rope stretched between the American and Canadian sides. His performance that day was a tremendous success witnessed by many thousands from far and wide. During that summer, he continued to introduce all sorts of variations in his walk above the gorge: wearing a hood over his face, pushing a wheelbarrow, using stilts, putting baskets on his feet, sitting down midway and then cooking an omelette with a stove he had brought along for the purpose as he sat on the wire, doing flips, hanging from the wire, you name it. He was abso-lutely phenomenal! And he worked always without a net.

One of his most remarkable feats was to carry his manager, Harry Colcord, on his back which he did for the first time on August 17, of 1859. This – as you might imagine – took a great amount of trust on the part of Mr. Colcord. Before they began, Blondin told his manager to look up (rather than into the maelstrom below). And he told him, "You are no longer Colcord; you are Blondin. Be a part of me, mind, body, and soul." And he further instructed him by telling him to sway with him rather than trying to do any balancing on his own. It was a strenuous journey, requiring both Blondin and his manager to stop along the way more than once so that the tightrope walker could rest. But, in the end they made it across safely each time they attempted it.

Now Colcord was no fool, nor did he have a death wish. He had witnessed the stupendous skill possessed by Blondin on the wire. Nevertheless, it was his decision to put his life in Blondin's hands, as it were, by actually making the crossing on Blondin's back that made it a real act of faith.

That is the kind of faith response that our Lord calls us to have in him. It is a faith that is more than mere lip-service; it is, rather, a faith that lives itself out in dedicated action.

One last thing, though we would like our faith to be that bold all the time, the reality is that – being human and therefore sinful – we do not always trust our Lord as we ought. This is what happens to Peter in today's Gospel. He's just fine as he begins his walk on the water. But then, we

are told, *"when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'"*

I think we can all identify fully with Peter here. For, while we have good intentions as regards our faith, we too often get distracted by what is going on around us and lose our focus upon our Lord. The wonderful thing here, though, is that even when this happens, Jesus remains there with us, ready to reach out to us in our need. Look what happens to Peter! As the text tells us: *"Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'"*

The point, of course, is this: When we falter - and we *do* - our Lord does not cast us off in anger. He is there for us even when we feel we have nothing left to go on. He is there to forgive our lack of faith. And he is there to give us his hand so that we might be sustained, uplifted, and renewed to continue our walk with him.

Whether it is a storm on the Sea of Galilee or a storm on the sea of life, our Lord is there, ready to reach out to each of us. You can depend on it! Amen.