

Don't Be Afraid

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[0:00] Amen. Amen.

So I have to say, selecting my sermon text was unusually easy this morning. I knew, for example, that I probably wasn't going to be preaching on the Old Testament lesson from Jonah, for obvious reasons.

And our epistle lesson is interesting because the lectionary has a way of trying to butcher and dance around Romans 9.

I decided that that wasn't going to fly, but it made the reading really long, probably too long to preach on for one sermon. So that leaves us with the gospel. Now I have to say, isn't this a striking passage?

Peter has a pretty striking experience in today's gospel reading, doesn't he? He gets out of the boat, he starts walking on the water, he turns his attention from Jesus, and he starts to sink.

[1:35] Now whenever I read this passage, I think of an experience that I had once that felt kind of like the opposite of this. One time as a college student, I'm walking across campus, and I'm deep in prayer, I'm lost in wonder, love, and praise, as Wesley's saying goes.

Now, if you know anything about me, you know that I can't walk and chew gum at the same time.

So walking and praying is not a safe thing. One second, I'm walking and I'm praising Jesus, and the next moment, like Peter, I'm sinking, ankle deep in wet cement.

Now, that certainly turned my focus from Jesus in a sudden and vivid way. Kind of the opposite of what happened to Peter.

He turned his attention from Jesus first, then he started to sink. But here's something I want us to think about in our account for this morning.

I want us to think about our temptation to fear. I want us to think about Jesus' ability to rescue us from fear and danger. And I want us to think about how both of these things relate to the authority of Jesus.

[2:50] Now, we certainly see the fear of the disciples, don't we? They're in a rough spot. They're on rough seas. It's dark. Apparently, it's a pretty creepy atmosphere. They're without Jesus.

They're afraid. What happens here? We read, In the fourth watch of the night, Jesus came to them walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, It is a ghost.

And they cried out in fear. Now, lest we be tempted to laugh at the disciples, their superstition, their willingness to give into such an unreasonable fear, yes, they really do see Jesus and think that he's a ghost.

And no, it's not a joke. They really are afraid of that. But let's ask ourselves this. How often do we give way to fears that are completely unreasonable? Unlike the disciples, as they were at this point, we understand Christ crucified.

We understand the power of the risen Lord. We understand his authority over all things. We have the advantage of knowing about all of that. But what happens? The smallest things, the most unreasonable things, can make us anxious, worried, and fearful.

[4:07] In the Christian life, I've had to deal with the reality, and I'd say you probably have too, that we sometimes worry ourselves about the most trivial things. Dealt with this recently, in my own life, confession time here.

As most of you know, Elaine and I are in the process of purchasing a home. Now, due to my service as a National Guardsman, I qualify for a VA home loan. But due to a paperwork error between the Army and the VA, I found myself in the process having difficulty proving my eligibility for the loan. Now, I absolutely agonized about that. I'm not going to lie. I remember asking Elaine, what if this simple clerical error causes us not to be able to buy the house? She simply says to me, well, if it's God's will, it'll work out.

If it's not, then we'll see what we're supposed to do instead. She was right. Little clerical error isn't too big for God, as it turns out.

The problem, of course, was essentially solved with a quick email and a short phone call. And I realized, looking at the situation, that my worry was at least as ridiculous as the disciples thinking that they'd seen a ghost.

[5:25] Now, sometimes, the things that we're afraid of are legitimately scary things. We look at Peter's experience of nearly drowning in the sea. We read, Peter answered him, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.

He said, Come. So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, Lord, save me.

Ever been there? I think I probably prayed the prayer, Lord, save me, more times than I could count. It's a good one to have in your prayer arsenal. What happens to Peter? He's looking to Jesus.

He's walking on the water, and when does he start to sink? When he sees the wind, when he's afraid, that's when he starts to sink. He's doing fine with his eyes on Jesus, but fear starts to drag him down, doesn't it?

Dangerous winds, stormy seas, sinking into the abyss. That is scary, life-and-death kind of stuff. Fear about the big stuff.

[6:30] Fear about the life-and-death stuff. Fear about the things that can rend our hearts and feel like they shatter our world. That stuff is no joke. But here's something that we need to understand.

Jesus came to set us free from fear. Do you believe that? Yeah. What do I mean by that?

Well, let's think of a few examples. What does sin do to us? Doesn't it make us afraid? Doesn't it even make us afraid of God? Look at what happened in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve fall into sin.

What do they do? They run. They hide. When we think about our sin in light of God's perfect holiness, that can be a scary thing.

That can make us feel like we're sinking, can't it? Because, of course, without Christ we would be. But then we look to the Gospel. We look to the cross of Christ where we see the great exchange where He takes our sin and gives us His perfect righteousness.

[7:34] And we realize that we don't have to be afraid of condemnation. And we are free to look to Jesus, to come to Him on the water, as it were, to serve Him, freely forgiven, free, and grateful.

Jesus rescues us from that fear. What about the fear of death? What about the fear of the devil? Jesus came to set us free from that bondage. We read of Jesus in Hebrews 2.

Since, therefore, the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself, likewise, partook of the same things. That through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death.

That is the devil. And deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. Fear of death keeps us trapped.

Fear keeps us in bondage. Jesus sets us free from fear. Because here's the point.

[8:39] The disciples were afraid. And so are we sometimes. Let's be honest. But Jesus is able to set us free from fear and the things that make us afraid.

And He is willing to do just that. What does He say to the disciples when they're flipping out because they think they see a ghost? Immediately, Jesus spoke to them, saying, Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. He assures them even over a concern that might seem silly. He sets them free from their superstitious fear that they have seen a ghost.

When the trivial concerns of life, the irrational fears that we sometimes face, when those things beset us too, Jesus calls us to look to Him. To look to Him and not be afraid.

He is not only able to put those fears to rest, He is willing to do it. He wants to do it. He delights in putting away our fears, even if they're ridiculous and unfounded.

[9:51] But He is also able to rescue us from the big stuff. Sure, we see that Peter takes his eyes off Jesus. He starts to sink. He is facing the awful prospect of a watery grave and the storm.

Now to Peter's credit, he does the right thing after he makes that mistake. He cries out, Lord, save me. What does he find? Right away, Jesus reached out His hand and took hold of him, saying to him, O you of little faith, why did you doubt?

He cries out to the Lord to save him. And he actually does. We cry out to the Lord to save us, and what happens? He actually does it, doesn't he? That, of course, doesn't mean that we won't have

trials.

It doesn't mean that we won't suffer hardship. This isn't a prosperity gospel message here. It doesn't mean that we won't encounter pain and grief in this life.

We will. We do. It does mean that the eternal hope that we have in Jesus, God's grace to us in Jesus, the hope of the gospel, is stronger than those forces that would seek to draw us into the abyss.

[11:08] It doesn't mean that the storms won't come, that the seas won't rage, that we won't ever find ourselves afraid, discouraged, or wounded. But it does mean that the power of Jesus to pull us out of the depths is unlimited.

In Peter's experience here, I find myself reminded of what we read in Hebrews 12. Let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. Now, Peter's example serves as kind of an illustration in some ways, doesn't it, of what happens when we stop looking to Jesus.

That's when we really find ourselves in trouble. But we're called to keep looking to Jesus. No matter how high the waves get, no matter how much the storm rages, no matter how dark the clouds, we look to Jesus.

And if we feel that we're sinking, if we feel that we're afraid, if we feel that we are overwhelmed, that's when we really need to look to Jesus. To cry out to Him, Lord, save me.

[12:29] And He will. How can we have confidence that this is true? Think that the answer is revealed in what the disciples in the boat realized and proclaimed.

We read, when they got into the boat, the wind ceased, and those in the boat worshiped Him saying, truly, you are the Son of God. They realized something about Jesus in that moment, didn't they?

They realized that He has power, that He has authority over the wind and the waves. They see that. They see what that means.

because by their confession that He is the Son of God, we can see that they realized even more than that. They realized that Jesus has authority over everything.

They saw Jesus walking on the water. They saw Peter rescued from drowning. They saw the wind die down and the seas calm. And they worshipped Him because they realized who He is.

[13:44] they saw His authority, His power to save them. They saw who He is as the very Son of God.

I preach this sermon knowing that some of you have been walking through some very stormy seas. I want you to know that this message is especially for you this morning.

for those who haven't been walking through stormy seas. Truth is that we will eventually so this sermon is really for all of us.

And here is the message I want us to take away. We don't have to be afraid because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus Christ.

and this same Jesus is the Savior who loves us and died for us. What stormy sea can compete with that? You know, I think especially we need to hear it this week.

[14:54] If you've been watching the news, you've probably seen that a lot of people are worried about the prospect of nuclear war wiping millions of us off the face of the earth. Now, in light of that concern, I want us to consider a simple question.

Do you think that threat is really a challenge to the Lordship and the authority of Jesus? Our concerns, our fears, our troubles, our pain, these things are no match for the loving authority of Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord.

I think that our gospel lesson for this morning points us to the truth that Martin Luther expressed so powerfully in his great hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, where Luther writes, Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing?

We're not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. Now we've seen where trust in our own strength or our own confidence will get us.

That is plunging beneath the stormy seas into the abyss. That's what happens when we look to ourselves. Because I will be honest with you brothers and sisters, our own strength is no match for the things that would seek to drag us under and for the storm that rages around us.

[16:26] But, we do have the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing, Christ Jesus. And as Luther reminds us, he, the Lord Jesus Christ, will win the battle.

He has pulled us from the deep, he will calm the storm, and he will win the battle. Look to him, the author and finisher of our faith.

Look to him, especially when the storms rage. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.