

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 9, 2020 (Proper 14, Year A)
1 Kings 19:9-18
Matthew 14:22-33

Peter was drowning. The wind and the waves were pulling him under.

LIFE has a way of DOING that to us. Just when we think we can do it all on our own, we find ourselves slipping under. Terrified, swallowing water, flailing about.

Peter doesn't JUST flounder because he takes his eyes off of Jesus, but also because he becomes afraid.

And, frankly, that fear is JUSTIFIED. It's a STORM, for heaven's sake, raging strong enough to sink the BOAT, let alone drown a single person. He has a PERFECTLY GOOD REASON to be afraid.

And so do WE. Whether it's a fear of the return of an illness, of loneliness after a loss, of not being accepted, of how we'll fare in a new chapter in our lives, of the loss of civility in our NATION, of violence, of the direction of our country, of a PANDEMIC.... You name it, there's a lot in our INDIVIDUAL AND CORPORATE lives that can make us afraid. And that fear can be debilitating. It sneaks up on us, paralyzes us, and makes it difficult to move forward at ALL, let alone with confidence.

In an old peanuts cartoon strip, Charlie Brown goes to Lucy for a nickel's worth of psychological advice. She proceeds to pinpoint his PARTICULAR "fear". "Perhaps," she says, "you have hypengyophobia, which is the fear of responsibility."

Charlie Brown says "no."

"Well, perhaps you have ailurophobia, which is the fear of cats."

"No."

"Well, maybe you have climacophobia, which is the fear of staircases."

"No."

Exasperated, Lucy says, "Well, maybe you have pantophobia, which is the fear of EVERYTHING."

Charlie Brown says, "Yes, that's the one!"

Sometimes it can FEEL like we are afraid of everything. We're afraid of ourselves. We're afraid of OTHER people. We're afraid of the future. We're afraid of the past. We're afraid of life. We're afraid of death. Every person, every Christian, must fight their OWN fears.

But, over and over again the message of the Bible is fear NOT. When Abram took his family to the Promised Land, he feared that he was turning his back on everything he knew, exchanging his security for the unknown. God spoke to him: "Fear not Abram, I am your shield, and your reward will be great."

When the Jews stood at the Red Sea and could see Pharaoh's chariots coming on the horizon, they cried out that they would all be slaughtered. Moses said to them, "Stand still, fear not, and see the salvation of the Lord."

When the angel of the Lord came to Mary and said that she would bear a child, she trembled with fear. What would BECOME of her? Said the angel, "Fear not Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Fear not, fear not, fear not. It's all over the Bible.

A story: John had lost his job. He'd been without work for two years. During that time he found out his wife had cancer. One day, he was sitting in the hospital waiting room. Tears rolled down his cheeks. His shoulders rose and fell, as he sobbed with his head in his hands. When the grief could bring no MORE tears, he MOANED like a foghorn wailing in the night.

Now, the waiting room was half-filled with people. They shifted in their uncomfortable chairs. THEY were under emotional stress TOO, but in their EMBARRASSMENT over John's suffering, they didn't know what to do. Maybe because HIS pain was too close to THEIRS, and it could awaken the hidden fear THEY felt for their OWN loved ones.

A small child squirmed loose from her mother's arms and ran around the couch. The TIRED woman did LITTLE to CONSTRAIN the active child. The toddler played with the water fountain, the magazines, tipped over a coffee cup. A mess followed in her wake. The twenty people in the room discovered that it was easier to focus on this curious child than to deal with the sobbing man.

She finally stopped in front of JOHN. Her face became intent. She moved forward carefully and looked seriously and deeply, as tears rolled down the face of this grief-stricken person.

The waiting room became silent. All eyes focused on this child-adult encounter. What would the child DO to this man, who should be left alone? She quietly toddled over to his knees. Her hand reached out to his face, and she gently wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"All right, all right, all right," she said softly.

The man opened his eyes. The shape of his mouth slowly changed. He gazed, as the littlest one in the room continued to soothingly wipe his face. He gently caught her hand between his wrinkled fingers, and kissed it.

It was a God moment. This is how the Lord works. This is what the KINGDOM of God LOOKS like. The Lord provides.

The lessons for this Sunday tell of the coming of God to people under great stress. When Elijah had to flee for his life, he went to the mountain of the Lord, and the Lord came to him, not in the way he EXPECTED, not in the great wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, not in any POWERFUL sign, but in the sound of sheer silence. I like the old translation of the phrase better: "a still small voice."

When the disciples were tormented by the wind and waves, Jesus came to them on the water and said to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And when Peter called out for saving help, he felt a HAND, a firm, STRONG hand. He looked up, and it was the master, holding him fast.

And for old John as he wept, God's saving help came in the small voice and tiny hand of a child. The Lord provides.

WITH Peter, DESPERATE for salvation, we reach up and cry out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus did. And Jesus DOES. And Jesus WILL. IN Jesus, God reaches down into our world and SAVES us.

When we live with an attitude of scarcity, despair and self-pity threaten to turn us IN on ourselves. We can't see what we CAN do, only what we CAN'T do. We can only nay-say and find fault. Think about it, when we read this story, didn't we CRITICIZE Peter to ourselves, MOCK him for even TRYING, and for his lack of faith? Or did we celebrate that, for a MOMENT, he DID walk on the water? How many people can say that?

Jesus made a way. Jesus comes to us and says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Sometimes he shouts it over the noise of the storm; and sometimes he whispers it in a "still small voice." Either way, our Lord comes to us in times of great stress, and provides for us. God GIVES us our daily bread.

We say, "Lord, save me," and Jesus reaches out and catches us. Have faith. We may not know HOW we'll make it through the night, but Jesus knows we WILL. Have faith. We may not know what will happen NEXT, but God will make a way. Have faith. We have FAR more resources than we know. We are CAPABLE of far more than we can BELIEVE. Have faith.

Jesus calls to us, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." So, child of God, if the wind and the waves are overwhelming YOU this day, know that the firm, strong hand of the master holds you fast, and will NEVER let you go. Amen.