

Matthew 14:22-33

Take Courage

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Imagine being in a small wooden boat in the middle of lake with the wind against you. All you want to do is get to the shore, get back to dry land, back to your home. Now add to that the fact that it's night-time, the early hours of the morning, and the wind is not just against you, but battering the boat. And then you see a figure in the distance walking on top of the water. Surely the only possible response to this situation is fear. This must be a ghost, an apparition. Nothing with physical form could be walking on top of the water.

For the disciples in our gospel reading today, it would seem fear is a very valid response. The wording in the original Greek basically says they were being tortured by the waves. And so they were in no position to deal with seeing a figure walking toward them. There's even more going on in the cultural background that we might easily skip over. In the ancient world the oceans and seas represented pure chaos. Humanity was incapable of controlling them, and so a boat ride even on the relatively small Sea of Galilee was always an exercise fraught with danger.

We can easily expect that the disciples were afraid for their lives even before seeing Jesus walking towards them. But over their cries of fear, Jesus calls to them, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." These three brief statements are packed with significance.

'Don't be afraid', often translated as 'fear not', appears again and again in the scriptures. Almost every time an angel shows up to deliver a message from God, their opening line is 'Do not be afraid'. The young man or angel in the empty tomb says 'fear not' to the women as they look in on that first Easter morning. Jesus, at his transfiguration, tells the disciples not to fear after they hear the Father speak from heaven and fall to the ground. Jesus, when warning the disciples of the persecution that is to come, repeats it several times:

"So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." (Matthew 10:26, NRSV)

"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." (Matthew 10:28, NRSV)

"So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:31, NRSV)

The risen Lord Jesus, when appearing to the disciples, regularly greets them with this same phrase.

"Do not be afraid" is a word of divine assurance in the midst of danger, when there is good cause to be afraid. It's the assurance of the presence of God. God is here with you in the midst of this danger, so do not be afraid. This is what Jesus is telling his disciples - 'God is here'. And not just here in a general sense. The second of his three statements is much more than that. When he says, "It is I", this is the same phrase that we might otherwise translate as "I am". As in, the response God gave to Moses at the burning bush when he asked who he should say has sent him to Pharaoh. "I am who I am", says God. Jesus, as he approaches the boat, reveals himself, not simply as Jesus, their teacher, their Rabbi, but as "I am."

So because God is here present with them, because the great 'I am' is here, even in the midst of the chaos of the waters, they should 'take courage'. Other translations put it as 'take heart' or 'be encouraged'. And again, this is a common phrase of Jesus. He says it to the paralysed man as he forgave his sins and then healed him, enabling him to walk: "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." (Matthew 9:2, NRSV) He says it to the woman who suffered bleeding for twelve years and touched his cloak hoping to be healed: "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well". (Matthew 9:22, NRSV) He says it as he warns the disciples that the powers of this world will hate them just as they hated him: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33, NRSV)

Jesus has clearly identified himself by saying to the disciples "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." These three statements together should leave no doubt in their minds. But like so many other occasions where these phrases are used, Jesus' self-revelation moves beyond his words. His actions are also revealing. According to Job 9:8, God alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea. In Psalm 89:9, the psalmist exalts the Lord, "You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them." In the midst of the sea's churning, Jesus does what only God can do. His words and his deeds show them that he is God, here in the flesh.

And yet Peter needs more proof. Or perhaps in the chaos it just hasn't dawned on him that this is Jesus, that he is the Messiah, and that really, they need not be afraid. Interestingly, Peter's question places him in rather undesirable company. This is like the question Satan asks when tempting Jesus in the wilderness. This is like the question the High Priest asks at the trial of Jesus. And this is like the question the mockers at the cross asked as Jesus hung there dying for the sins of the world. "If it is really you". "If you really are the Son of God".

But Jesus responds with abundant grace and invites Peter to come to him. Peter takes Jesus at his word and steps out of the boat to walk on the water toward Jesus. He discovers quickly that Jesus' words of assurance, and his invitation, did not mean the dangerous wind and waves had subsided. So, Peter was frightened for his life once again, for good reason, as he began to sink into the chaos of the waves. God being with you doesn't mean the danger instantly disappears.

But Peter does rightly know what we all need to do when caught in situations like this, sinking like a rock, is call upon the name of the Lord. "Lord, save me!", he cries out. And, of course, that is exactly what Jesus does. And when they are all back in the boat, the disciples' response is fitting. They worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

This too should be our response. Jesus comes to us with words of peace and comfort, he comes to us with words of forgiveness and healing, he encourages us and says there is no need to be afraid. And the true and fitting response is to worship him and confess that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Of course, that is precisely what we are doing today as we gather for worship, as we hear the Word read and proclaimed, and as we gather around his table. So today, may those words that he spoke on Galilee, and in many other places be for you. Be encouraged. Jesus himself is here. Do not be afraid. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.