

The Church Like a Boat on Stormy Waters

Sermon for the 4th Sunday before Lent

Sermon Text: Matthew 14:22-33



²² Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." ²⁸ And Peter 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 and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out His hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² And 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."

We make first contact with our environment through our breathing. We breathe into the world and, at the same time, draw the air from outside into our lungs. But what happens when we can no longer trust the air we breathe in because it could be infected with Covid? What happens when I can no longer trust the air I breathe out because it could also be infected with Covid and could make others sick? The virus is everywhere. It has us in a stranglehold of fear and I look forward to the day when I can breathe again without masks and fear! The only question is this: Will the fear really be gone then, or will another new catastrophe emerge? Will we have something else to fear? Perhaps fear itself is a virus that is everywhere!

When we read the Bible, we see where fear comes from. The first consequence of the fall was that Adam and Eve were afraid. They were afraid and therefore had to hide from God. Ever since then, we humans have been afraid – afraid of war, natural disasters, people, and even afraid of ourselves. Basically, it's always about one thing: we are afraid because we are separated from God and that's why we would have to expect that this same fear would disappear when God comes to us again through Jesus! When Jesus comes, fear disappears like melting butter in the hot sun! And yet we Christians are also afraid. In today's sermon text, we see both happen – wonderful security under the protective hand of Jesus and fear too. Everything started so well. The Jesus' disciples had just experienced the wonderful feeding of the 5,000 as well as the healing of many sick people. Rejoicing and praising, they walked beside Jesus with their heads held high. They were the big heroes of the day with Jesus! And then Jesus sent them away. Jesus was even insistent about it. They should go away, away from Jesus! And it all had to happen so quickly. They had to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee in a small boat and they had to do it all without Jesus. Then, an enormous storm came. The disciples were alone... Suddenly, their courage could no longer be seen. They were deathly afraid. These disciples, in their little boat on stormy

waters, have always been a representation of the whole Church. The disciples in the boat are alone. Jesus sent them away and they had to endure difficult times without Him. We must endure without seeing Jesus for a while. In many ways, Jesus warns us Christians that we must live without seeing Him for a time. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to His disciples, "A little while, and you will see me no longer!" and in the parable of the 10 virgins, we must wait a very long time before the Bridegroom comes again. And this time without being able to see Jesus is quite dangerous. This is how we Christians live, as though big waves threaten to sweep over the boat. We will sometimes be threatened from within and sometimes from outside, sometimes from cruel persecution of Christians, sometimes from unbelief that creeps into our midst. All over Germany, people are leaving the churches. Even in our church, the SELK, there is a loss of members which worries us. And then, doubts arise from some of us. Why does Jesus leave His Church alone? Why does Jesus leave the disciples alone to fight against the storm at first? And why doesn't He give us peaceful waters and a gentle breeze that would bring us safely to the other shore from the very beginning? And why does He let Peter walk on the water as if the lake were a single beam that can be walked upon, only to let him sink back down into the depths? Yes, with these "why" questions, we encountered something basic, and we can go back all the way to the first people with this question and ask: "why does God allow Satan and evil in the first place?" Couldn't He have made everything much easier?

Whoever thinks that I have the answer to this question now is mistaken. There is no satisfying answer for peace of mind at this point. The Bible also gives no clear answer for the "why" questions that we so often have. And yet, the reading for today gives us a clue as to how we can deal with such questions and above all how we can deal with fear and how we can breathe freely again. At that time, when the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee in the storm, death was very close to them. The Feeding of the 5000 was suddenly completely forgotten as well as the many other miracles Jesus had done. Even Jesus was nowhere to be seen in the middle of the disciples' fear. And where was Jesus? Jesus did nothing but pray – the entire time he prayed! And he certainly prayed for these same disciples in the boat! With this, Jesus showed what he will continue to do in the future. He prays for us – even now! Just as the letter to the Hebrews explains: Jesus is our High Priest who does nothing but pray for us even now in heaven. And Jesus doesn't just stay in heaven. He comes to us. He goes exactly to where we are afraid. Jesus did the same with His disciples. He came to them. Just like that, He came walking across the water. But that's why, at first, these same disciples were even more afraid. That's understandable because Jesus didn't normally just walk across water. That's why Peter asks Jesus: just say Your Word then we will recognize You. And that's just what happened. Jesus spoke and Peter could also walk on the water. This picture of Peter walking on water is also a representation of the whole Church. Jesus often doesn't take the danger away. Jesus tell us: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b). Just as Jesus didn't take the storm and waves away for Peter and the disciples, He doesn't do that immediately for the Church either. As long as we live in this world, we will go through all kinds of trials and tribulations. And Jesus wants to show us through Peter how things will go for us in the Church. We should not and must not focus all our attention on the danger but only on Jesus! As soon as we rely on our own understanding or as soon as we replace God's Word with something else or as soon as we rely on our own strength and no longer trust in Jesus, we are lost, then we sink down into the sea and die. And that's exactly what Peter had to experience hands-on when he was allowed to walk on the Sea of Galilee with Jesus.

But wait a moment... all of that is not quite right. Peter didn't really walk on water for very long. What happened on the Sea of Galilee is actually the opposite. Peter was pulled, coughing and

spluttering, out of the water and was saved by Jesus. I think that is the greatest comfort in this story. No, we really don't have a hero of faith in Peter but instead, a disciple who must constantly be pulled with a strong hand out of the depths where he had once again become ensnared. And that's the exact picture of the Church. Jesus doesn't expect us to be heroes of faith. Just as He doesn't expect us to walk on water today, He doesn't expect us to valiantly master our lives simply with a firm faith and always with a smiling face. No. Jesus knows all of our weaknesses and He knows exactly how difficult it can be to get by without Him. That's exactly why He gives us His Word to take with us on our way. That's also exactly why He's always so quick to save us from all kinds of entanglements.

Then as Jesus got into the boat and the waves calmed down all at once, they said all together: "Truly You are the Son of God!" What the disciples said at that time was the greatest miracle of this story. In the end, only Jesus stood there. Jesus against fear. I know there is a virus and still many other variants that frighten us too. We also don't know how things will go on. And yet, Jesus stands before us. Jesus shows us the welcoming face of God. Jesus shows us that God also has a plan for us even when fear is choking us and trying to take away our trust. Jesus, You are the Son of God, You are God with us! Amen.