

Lectionary 19 Year A 2020
August 9, 2020

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

As a child, I was easily afraid, and with two older siblings living in the house, they rarely wasted an opportunity to take advantage of this. Actually, my sister just liked scaring people in general. She once locked my brother and his friend in the basement, turned out all the lights and told them ghost stories until the friend ran home crying. But my siblings especially liked to torture me on long car trips. When I was a young child, particularly in the early 90's, we'd often take a family vacation at a cabin in Eagle River, Wisconsin. As we drove through Wisconsin we'd end up going through quite a few corn fields, and my siblings had me absolutely convinced that the Children of the Corn (from the movie) were going to come out and kidnap me when we stopped for gas. I ended up spending years afraid of driving through corn fields.

I'm sure we all have some kind of story about being afraid—either our own, or our children, or a family member. Sometimes these fears are unfounded; there obviously weren't children of the corn that were going to kidnap me. But sometimes these fears are based on real things. They can be as simple as being afraid of thunderstorms, or it could be a fear of walking down the street alone at night, or a fear of war, violence, illness or death. Nearly every political campaign these days uses some amount of fear tactics to make you afraid of the other candidate winning. People of color live in fear of being shot by police for a routine traffic stop. And of course, in the midst of COVID-19, fear has been a very common reaction to the world around us: we are afraid of becoming sick, we're afraid of the risks of sending our children to school, we're afraid of unemployment and damage to the economy, we're afraid of struggling churches closing their doors for good, and so much more. The list of fears can go on and on.

In our Gospel reading today, the disciples are afraid too, while crossing the chaotic waters of the Sea of Galilee. Now, to be fair, Jesus wasn't with them at this point. Jesus had compelled them to go on ahead of him, while he went up the mountain to pray. And, it wasn't like this was a small lake that they were crossing, either. The Sea of Galilee is about 64 square miles, which is similar in size to the Sandusky Bay near Cedar Point in Ohio, or just a bit smaller than the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri. It was a large body of water that experienced chaotic winds, waves and storms. Fishermen would venture out onto the sea with fear of the unknown chaos of the waters.

So here are the disciples, headed out in a boat to cross a large chaotic sea, without Jesus, and in the dark. Even though they had seen what Jesus was capable of, healing the sick and feeding the multitudes, they couldn't help but be afraid. And of course, it doesn't help that they saw a figure walking toward them on the water like a ghost.

And yet, the most common command in the Bible is "Do not be afraid." This phrase, in some form, appears at least 70 times throughout the Bible. Jesus commands the disciples and the crowds many times with these words, and these are the words that Jesus brings the disciples as he walks toward them on the water in the early morning. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Fear often paralyzes us or makes us run to a place of safety and security. But in Peter's case, in his fear, he wanted Jesus to prove that it was really him by commanding Peter to walk on water too. And this was a big step. The wind was starting to pick up, and it would certainly be safer to stay in the boat. But at Jesus' command, Peter stepped out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus. He kept walking until the wind scared him, and then he began to sink. Jesus then reached out his strong hands, and pulled Peter out of the water. As they stepped into

the boat, the wind calmed once again, and the disciples proclaimed that Jesus truly was the Son of God.

The disciples, in their fear, found comfort in the presence of Jesus. Of course, this isn't the first time that's happened with Jesus, and it certainly won't be the last. In the midst of the disciples' fear, and in the midst of our own, Jesus meets us with calmness, power, and comfort. Jesus gives us strength and boldness to step out of the boat and do what seems impossibly scary. Jesus empowers us to share God's good news with others, and to *become* the good news for others through our service.

Jesus asks and even commands us to do things that might make us afraid. But Jesus never leaves us alone in our work. Jesus always walks with us. And when fear causes us to sink into the watery chaos, Jesus reaches toward us with an outstretched hand, to help us, to reassure us, and to calm our storms.

Throughout history, there have been all kinds of fearful times—plagues, storms, political tensions and more. And Jesus has walked with God's people through all their fears and calmed the storms. And that's what Jesus does for us in these fearful times, too.

When chaos and fear are all around us, and nothing seems to make sense, we can trust that Jesus is with us. When Jesus commands to step out in service to others in ways that make us feel unsure, we can trust that Jesus is with us. When it seems as though there's nothing left for us to grasp hold of, and we're sinking fast into the sea, we find Jesus there, reaching out for us, rescuing us from the chaos, keeping our head above water, and pulling us into the boat. Jesus is our help and comfort in the midst of fear and always. No matter what comes our way, Christ is with us as our comfort and guide, calming us and calling us to new life every step of the way. Thanks be to God. Amen.