

“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid!”

Mark 6:45-51 “⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.⁴⁷ And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, ⁵⁰ for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” ⁵¹ And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded.”

What are you afraid of? I would like you to please take a few seconds and identify in your mind one, two, or three things that you’re afraid of. Please be honest.

That request is probably something you weren’t expecting to hear in a sermon. I love a story I heard once about something that wasn’t quite expected in a Children’s message. The pastor asked the kids, “What has

four legs, a tail, and barks?” One little boy slowly raised his hand and quietly said, “I want to say a dog, but I think I’m supposed to say ‘Jesus.’” (Because that’s what it seems like the answer always is in any children’s sermon.)

So, what are you afraid of? Are you afraid of dying? Rev. Dr. C.F.W. Walther, the first president of our church body, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod once said that, “Many preachers describe Christians as people who do not fear death. That is a serious misrepresentation, because most Christians are afraid of dying. If a Christian does not fear death and declares that he is ready to die at any time, God has given him a special grace.” Walther continues: “Some have expressed this sentiment before their doctor told them that they would not survive the night, but after that they are seized with a terrible fear.” (Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible, C.F.W. Walther, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, pp. 348-9).

So what are you really afraid of? Is it your finances? Not being able to pay your bills? Are you afraid because your family situation is not what it ought to be? Would you be embarrassed if your friends or co-workers, knew about the problems you have close to home? Maybe you’re a student and are seriously afraid of not fitting in at school this fall or of flunking a class and having

to tell that bad news to your parents and your friends.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid!" That is a command. It's not a suggestion. It's not an invitation. It's a **command**. In other words it is Law. In God's Word, the Law tells us what we should do and should not do. It directs us as to how we should and should not be, but the thing about the Law, is that it does not give us the ability to fulfill the command! The disciples were in a state of being terrified when they heard Jesus say this command: "Do not be afraid!"

I wonder how many times through the centuries a sermon has been preached when the preacher says, "Don't be afraid!" as if that's supposed to make everyone brave in an instant! But our Lord Jesus said more than just those words: "Do not be afraid." He said. "Take heart; **it is I**. Do not be afraid!" **That is Gospel:** "**It is I**," I am the one who upholds all things by the word of my power. It is I who came into the world to be your Redeemer. I am the one who pours out my spirit through My Word, through Holy Baptism, through Holy Communion, through Holy Absolution. It is I who loves you and will never leave you or forsake you! **I am** the bread of life, the light of the world, the Good Shepherd, the door to the sheep, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, the life,

the true vine! **It is I! Those words are wonderful Gospel!**

In the New Testament the word for fear is "phobos". We get our English word phobia from that old Greek word. "Phobos" has a range of meanings in the God's Word. Fear in the Bible is a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum fear is something that comes into our lives and threatens to overwhelm us, to do us harm, and we feel there is nothing we can do to stop it. Death is one of those things. The disciples seeing what they thought was an apparition, a ghost, coming at them walking on the lake was one of those things.

Maybe those fears like not being able to pay your bills, being a failure, not fitting in, not having the kind of family life you wish you could have, are one of those things that you feel will overwhelm you, that you can't handle.

The other extreme in the Bible's use of "phobos" is something very similar. It's our **reaction** when something overwhelms us but here a great force appears to help us, to free us, and that is God for us not against us. Jesus says, "It is I." And when you consider fear in your own life, the challenge is not so much to just stop being afraid. That doesn't work anyway. The real fear is to **make the move**. The move from over there where there is no way

that we can contend with whatever is threatening us to make the move over here to the fear of the Lord, the reverence, the awe that “It is I,” and because it is Jesus, we can lessen, maybe even put away our natural fears.

Fear makes us run for our lives, our hearts pound. We are afraid that we may not make it in school, or with the bank, or in our family life.

The key is not to hear the words “Do not be afraid.” It is to hear the words “Take courage. It is I.” It is to come to the one who says “Come to me all you who are weary and are burdened and I will give your rest.” To come to the Good Shepherd, Jesus, who carries lambs in His arms, close to His chest. And says ‘It’s all right. It is I. Do not be afraid I have redeemed you. I have called you by name.’ To come to the one who faced sin, death, and the devil, the worst forces that exist and conquered them all for you by His death on the cross and His triumphant resurrection!

As long as we live in this sinful world, we are never going to be able to completely put away all fear in our lives. But what we *can* do is to acknowledge what is going on in our hearts to move from over here with our fears to over here with the objective, revealed word of Good News from Jesus. To trust that Jesus is with us wherever we go and in

whatever we go through. That kind of trust was so beautifully illustrated by the little boy who was fearfully hesitated about going down his stairs at home into that dark, foreboding basement. And yet he prayed, “Jesus, it’s dark down there, I’m going to need You to take my hand!” (pause)

So what is it in your life that has four legs, a tail, and.... doesn’t bark,... but roars? Its mouth is open to devour you. Where is that prowling lion trying to put fear into your heart and take a bite out of your faith in God and your trust in His Word? The way to ward off that prowling lion is not with the words “Do not be afraid.” But with the whole context: “Take heart; *it is I*. Do not be afraid!” Amen!