

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

Our Gospel lesson today follows on the heels of last Sunday’s Gospel. The meal had ended. The 5,000 had been filled with Jesus’ teaching and with the bounteous and miraculous meal that He had provided.

It was time to go to the “other side” of the Sea of Galilee, to Bethsaida in the northeast corner of the Sea. That’s where Jesus wanted to go next to continue His ministry. Jesus and His disciples were in the “deserted place,” probably on the west side of the Sea, and so Jesus put His disciples in a boat and sent them ahead to Bethsaida.

Jesus then dismissed the crowds and went up on a mountain to pray. That’s always a good encouragement for us; if Jesus is a man of prayer, then so should we be faithful in our prayers.

The disciples were making their way across the Sea by boat, but the travel was difficult. They were making little headway; they had a strong wind blowing against them. They were rowing hard; their arms were probably getting weary; it was getting late; they struggled on into the fourth watch of the night (that’s into the early morning hours). We don’t know the position of the moon, but it was likely dark, very dark.

Have you ever been somewhere where it’s really dark? Caves are dark. Turn off all the lights, and you can see nothing. Tour guides usually do that so that you can experience it. It’s a bit frightening — unnerving — even though you know that your tour guide has the switch and can turn the lights on again.

I grew up in the country, on a farm. It would get dark there, too — not as dark as a cave, but on a moonless night, it could really get dark. Especially when I was young, it was frightening.

I think I’ve told you this before, but at our house, we rarely, if ever, pulled the curtains, after all, no one was out there to look in. But that didn’t mean that I didn’t see faces in the windows ... apparitions ... phantoms. I was young, and those faces were fearsome! Lying in bed, I would pull the covers over my head to ward them off.

And when I had to go out by myself to the barn to do chores at night — in the winter especially — even though we had a pole light, it was still dark. And I would race from the house to the barn so I could turn the light on in the barn. “Whew! I made it without anything getting me,” I would think. On the other hand, if Dad was with me, everything was different. No problem then. Dad was there; he would take care of me.

Phantasm, *phantasma* — that’s the word our Greek text uses when in the dark the disciples see Jesus walking past them on the water. And they were terrified by it! I can relate! Spooky! They thought Jesus was a ghost, a phantasm. It couldn’t be a man; a man can’t walk on water like that — no ordinary man, anyway.

Now, unlike my visions of faces in the window, which were just my imagination at work, the disciples did, in fact, see something! They just had it wrong! Jesus was not a ghost; He was not an apparition. It was He, in person, the Son of God in the flesh walking on the water! Not a phantasm, but truly fantastic! A Divine miracle!

And it’s true for us, isn’t it, that our imaginations can run away with us. What we imagine can be worse than the reality: our health, our financial situation, our relationships. And even if we are facing something that truly is bad, when we have someone beside us in the difficult times, it makes the situations bearable. For example, I just listened to an interview with Piper Kerman, the author of *Orange is the New Black*, about her year in prison. One point she made was that knowing that there was family, interested and waiting on the outside, made the time bearable.

So it was for the disciples. Their travel had been difficult; they really had seen Jesus, and not some phantasm. Their imaginations were truly worse than the reality. For in their terror, Jesus called out to them and calmed their fears. “Calm down, men! *Take heart! It is I! Do not be afraid.*” Jesus got in the boat; the winds were calmed; they were saved. And before you know it, they came ashore at Gennesaret, not their original destination, but safe and sound.

Dear friends, the Lord give us strength to trust “in God, our faithful God,” “when dark our road.” “Great woes may overtake [us], Yet he will not forsake [us],” writes the hymnist (LSB745:1). Indeed, He promised the Israelites as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land, “*Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of [the residents], for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you*” (Deut. 31:6). Likewise, the Lord has not forsaken us, not even us sinners. Rather, God gave His own Son to be our Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23), to be our Savior (Matt. 1:21). The eternal Son of God came down from the Father’s side and took on flesh that He might dwell among us.

Far from forsaking us, He condescended to our side, to love us and care for us and calm our fears. He humbled Himself even unto death, the death of a cross, for us. And then, of course, He rose again from the dead and, in so doing, promised us life, so that not even fearsome death need frighten us — death’s sting is not nearly so painful because of Jesus; death has not won the victory! Jesus did, and although we may have to pass through fearsome times, God gives us the fruits of Christ’s victory in resurrection and life as we trust in Him.

More than that, even though Jesus ascended into heaven, He departed not without promise. He said, “*I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you*” (John 14:18). And He sent the “*Helper, [the Holy Spirit,] to be with you forever,*” and to “ *dwell with you*” (John 14:16-17). And in His departing, He said, “*Lo, I will be with you always to the very end of the age*” (Matt. 28:20).

Like my Dad in my youth who was with me in the darkness and was such a comfort, like our loved ones gathered around us at the dark times of our life, but even more so, Jesus is with us “when dark our road.” David confesses it: “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me,*” (Ps. 23:4). Again, in the midst of darkness, of “*evildoers*” who assailed David “*to eat up [his] flesh, [his] adversaries and foes,*” he says, “*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*” (Ps. 27:1-2) And he acknowledges that even if mother or father forsake you, the Lord does not, but takes you in (Ps. 27:10).

In fact, we confess, the Lord is with us today. He is here in our midst as we gather two or three in His name. He is here with His grace and aid. And He is here especially in the Holy Supper of His body and blood for us. He says to us, “*Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.*” “I’m here to forgive you, to give you salvation, to give you strength, even though you walk in danger, to assure you, ‘*I will not leave you,*’ to give you hope in this life and the next.”

Dear saints, you are not alone. There is nothing to fear. The Lord is with you. Even more, as Scripture says, “*The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?*” (Heb. 13:6) So that we can sing confidently with the hymnist: “‘S be it,’ then, I say With all my heart each day. Dear Lord, we all adore You, We sing for joy before You. Guide us while here we wander Until we praise You yonder” (LSB745:5).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.