

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

*“Immediately,”* our Gospel begins. *“Immediately, [Jesus] made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side.”* Immediately after what? After He had done the mighty miracle of the loaves that we heard about last Sunday. Jesus sent His disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while *“he dismissed the crowd.”* Jesus had just hosted a great banquet foreshadowing the eternal, heavenly banquet to come; and, as a good host, he attended to His guests till all had departed.

Then He went up the mountain to pray. What a lesson for us! Remember that Jesus had taken His disciples out to this desolate place because they needed rest from the work they had just returned from doing. We often hear how Jesus would go off by Himself to find rest, and as He did here, He rested in conversation with His Father in heaven. Isn't that what we do when we come to church? Here the church gathers in our own “desolate” place. Here we disengage from the world and engage in conversation with God, hearing His word, being fed at His banqueting table, and speaking back to Him in prayer and praise. Here we find our Sabbath rest.

But as with Jesus in our Gospel, this rest doesn't last forever ... not yet. We have to come down from the mountain, as Jesus came down. And He, standing on the shore, could see the disciples out on the sea. They were making progress, but slowly ... *“painfully.”* The wind was against them. They weren't in any trouble, but they were working hard to get to the other side.

Jesus needed to rejoin His disciples, but how was He going to do that? Actually, I'm sure He knew what He was going to do as He sent the disciples off in the boat without Him. Jesus took off, walking across the sea — after all, as Archimedes first said and we all know: the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.

By the fourth watch of the night, Jesus was approaching the boat ... walking on the water! It would have been dark; perhaps the moon provided enough light so that the disciples could see this ghostly figure coming closer. But it surely couldn't be human ... not out there ... not in the middle of the sea! And it wasn't just their imagination — they all saw it. It had to be ... what else could it be, but ... a ghost?! And they were terrified!

But what they concluded was wrong. It wasn't a ghost. It was Jesus in the flesh. He was actually walking on the water.

Still, fear wells up in us when we are kept in the dark, in the face of the unknown. We fear the cancer diagnosis. What does this mean? What does the future hold? We imagine the worst. It makes us more afraid.

In the face of COVID, fear gripped the world. It was a “novel” coronavirus, unknown to us, and that ignorance generated fear. I don't want to downplay the significance of COVID. It was worse than the common cold for many; with more deaths caused by it than in a bad flu season. But we imagined it even worse; we feared hospitals being overwhelmed; we must shut everything down to “slow the spread,” and we did, except for essential services. In many places, the church was considered unessential with eternal consequences. The response and its consequences became worse than the disease.

There are surely other things that cause us to fear, things filled with unknowns and unknowables: the loss or change of a job or school, a move, a new addition to the family, a retirement, etc. Fears well up; we imagine the worst, and the fears increase. We cry out in fear, but not for mercy! We forget that Jesus is actually near as our helper.

But listen to the psalmist: *“Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is on my side as my helper; ... It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes”* (Ps. 118:5-9).

Jesus promises always to be near us. He says: *“behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matt. 28:20). He invites us to come to Him as we labor with fear and other burdens: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matt. 11:28-30). Come to Him; cry out to Him who says to us, essentially, “trust in Me; I have taken care of the big stuff by cross and resurrection — your eternal salvation; don't sweat the little stuff.” These are His actual words: *“do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”* (Matt. 6:31-33).

Of course, God's grace doesn't require our prayer, as if He wouldn't do anything for us if we didn't ask first. Not at all. In fact, the disciples didn't ask in our Gospel. They just cried out in terror. Yet, without their prayers, Jesus calmed their fears by His words: *“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”* And He calmed the wind, so that they could make it easily to shore.

Similarly, it wasn't because of our prayer that Jesus fearlessly was betrayed and beaten and scourged, that He ultimately died on a cross. That plan of salvation was in the works even before the foundation of the world. As St. Paul reminds us: *“If*

*God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:31-39).*

And yet we pray, not because God requires some catalyst to get His grace going, but because God Himself is gracious. We acknowledge it as part of the Lord's Prayer: "the kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer"; "the good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer"; "God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Petitions 2, 3, & 4). Still we pray ... that God's kingdom may come to us, that God's will may be done among us, that we may know that our daily bread has come from God and give Him thanks.

We pray to God through Him who died for us, but who rose again for us. "I know that my Redeemer lives ... He lives to silence all my fears; He lives to wipe away my tears; He lives to calm my troubled heart; He lives all blessings to impart" (LSB461:1, 5).

Our sermon hymn, too, from the pen of Paul Gerhardt, was most fitting. Be encouraged by Gerhardt's poetry:

"3. Take heart, have hope, my spirit, And do not be dismayed; God helps in ev'ry trial And makes you unafraid. Await His time with patience Through darkest hours of night Until the sun you hoped for Delights your eager sight.

"6. Our hands and feet, Lord, strengthen; With joy our spirits bless Until we see the ending Of all our life's distress. And so throughout our lifetime Keep us within Your care And at our end then bring us To heav'n to praise You there" (LSB754).

Jesus went out to pray and shows us the way. God grant these our prayers, too.

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