

## Why Are You So Afraid?

When I was serving as pastor in Muskegon, a member used to take me fishing in his boat out on Muskegon Lake. Now, There's a channel between Muskegon Lake and Lake Michigan and he would always suggest that we go out onto the big lake and fish there. But you know what? I never agreed to it. We were in a 16 foot open boat and Lake Michigan can have some major waves on it. I didn't want to have to swim for it when the boat flipped over. So I always feel a little uncomfortable with the question Jesus asked in our gospel lesson for this morning: **"You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"** They were in an open boat on the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a storm. The wind was howling and the waves were coming over the side. I have no trouble seeing why they were so afraid. But Jesus said that it showed that they had little faith. Then just to show them how safe they really were, he rebuked the wind and the waves and instantly, the sea was calm. The disciples were amazed and asked, **"What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"** Of course, that is the point of the story. The only kind of man who can control the wind and the waves is the man who is also the Son of God. Today, we've gathered in the midst of an international crisis. We've just spent a little time talking about what makes us afraid. But it isn't only the wind and the waves that obey Jesus. Germs and diseases and even pandemics obey him, too. Whatever happens in the days and weeks to come, Jesus is the answer to fear.

Fear is real. I imagine there are people here who think that the fear caused by the coronavirus is overblown. But I'm sure there are other people here who are very concerned, even afraid. If you have an elderly relative in a nursing home, you might have a very personal reason to be afraid. If you have a personal history of respiratory problems, you might be afraid. Even if you're not afraid of getting sick, the economic consequences of this epidemic could be severe. How many people are going to get sent home without pay because there just isn't work for them to do? How many contractors are going to see their business plummet because people aren't spending money right now? Fear is real. And fear can lead to panic. We've already seen the irrational buying sprees that are cleaning out grocery stores all over the metro area. So even if you aren't afraid, other people are. Doesn't Christlike love call us to minister to each other in our fear?

How do we do that? There is only one way: by pointing to Jesus. The same Jesus who calmed the storm is still in control of all things today. He promises to take care of us. When we're terrified by what is going on around us, like a parent, Jesus assures us that he is watching over us and that he will not let anything touch that is not for our good. When we're confused and uncertain, when we hear something different every day, when we don't know what to believe anymore, Jesus knows all. He knows how serious this epidemic is and who is overreacting and who isn't taking it seriously enough. He knows where every germ is and who's going to touch that surface. He knows whose immune system is weak and whose health can't take a respiratory infection. He knows us personally and how every difficulty we could face will affect us. And he loves us enough to make sure that nothing will harm us.

How do you know that's true? Not by evaluating the risk level we're at. Not by pointing out who's healthy and who's sick and then trying to match that up with who's really sincere about their faith and who's just going through the motions. That's pointing the wrong way – at us instead of at Jesus. We know that Jesus loves us because this is the Jesus who went to the cross for us. This is the Jesus who knew us by name before the world was created and who left the glories of heaven and lived as a poor, wandering teacher, because he wanted you and me to be with him in heaven forever. This is the Jesus who was willing to place himself under God's law and be perfect in our place and who was then willing to let God reject him and let evil humans torture him and kill him because all that pain, that hell and that death are what we deserved. He loved us too much to let us face it. That Jesus loves us too much to let us face anything here that will not be for our good.

But is love enough? I've sat with adult children who loved their parents and who would've done anything to heal their cancer or restore their health, who would've given anything to undo their confusion and dementia. But their love could only provide some care and then wait with them for the end to come. Jesus' love is not powerless like ours often is. Jesus didn't just die for us. He rose to give us life. He conquered death and sin and pain for us. There is nothing that he can't defeat or control for us – that's what the calming of the storm shows us. God the Father has put all things under Jesus' feet and he rules over everything for our good.

That promise takes away our fear. But does that promise mean that nothing bad will ever happen to us? No. You know it doesn't. Even though God loves us and holds all things in his hands, he sometimes allows the most painful things to enter our lives. So it's entirely possible that some of us will get this disease. Some of us could even die from it. It could ruin our businesses and devalue our investments and cost us a lot of money. Why would God let that happen to us?

In part, because this is still a sinful world. You and I live in the end times, the times between Jesus' ascension and his return. What did Jesus say these times would be like? There would be wars and rumors of wars. There would be famines and earthquakes. All the upheavals of this life are signs that the end is coming. Jesus described it as birth pains. You all know that birth pains aren't constant. The contractions come and then they stop. But they get closer and closer together and more and more intense. The coronavirus – and every other epidemic, every other hurt and sorrow of this life – is a birth pain. Until Jesus comes back, those contractions will come and go. When they come, they hurt. Even we believers have to live through those pains.

And on a personal level, Jesus promises that everything we face in our lives is for our good. That does not mean only nice things will happen to us. Pain is a part of life here. Sickness and threats are real. God does not promise to spare us all those things. He promises that he will be with us when we face them. He promises that he will hear our prayers and give us strength and even relief when that is what's best for us. He promises that he will work through those things and turn them into blessings – although he does not promise that we will always understand what he is doing here. We might have to wait until we get to heaven to see it. But he does promise that he will not allow anything to touch us unless it's part of his work to bless us. So we won't get sick unless that is what's best for us.

But when you're sick, when you're grieving, when people you love are hurting, it's hard to see that as something that is good for us. We might wish that Jesus would just say speak and all that pain and all those threats would go away. But that's why Jesus called his disciples "you of little faith." Faith means trusting Jesus even when life here hurts. Even that trust is a gift he gives us. Every time we come here and hear again that he has loved us and forgiven us, every time we hear his gospel promises, every time we come to communion, Jesus reaches down from heaven and renews our faith. Now, we don't always walk away feeling strong. Sometimes, we can't imagine how we're going to get through another day. But then evening comes and we're still here because Jesus got us through. Now, we might wish that Jesus would just make us into superchristians who are never afraid and who are never weak, no matter how much life hurts. But that's not we experience. We hurt and we fear and we struggle. Jesus gave us just enough strength to get through today and so tomorrow, we have to face it all again and appeal to him for strength again. But that's the way he works. He did get us through yesterday. And he will get us through today and tomorrow and every day until we stand with him.

So what do we do with our fear? We take it to Jesus. We confess our weakness and he forgives us. Jesus paid even for our weak faith. God forgives us for being afraid. We come to communion to receive his body and blood. We talk to fellow believers to be encouraged in the faith. And we turn our attention again and again to his promises to love us. All that fights against the fear that keeps rising in our hearts.

And then we live our lives here. Faith drives out fear. But at the same time, God tells us not to be foolish. When the devil took Jesus to the top of the temple and told him to jump off because God promises to protect us, Jesus said, "Don't put the Lord your God to the test." God calls us to take our responsibilities seriously and to do all reasonable things to guard our body and life and the bodies and lives of the people around us. So we wash our hands regularly. We accept our government's guidelines on how to deal with this crisis. We limit at risk behaviors and situations. School is closed and we're working around that. We will take careful precautions when we administer the Lord's Supper. When we visit the elderly and the sick, we'll do all we can to avoid being agents of physical harm – to include not coming if we're not feeling well. And we will ask God to bless all those efforts.

And we will pray that he end this scourge. We will pray that he preserve the lives of those who are sick. We will pray that he use this sign of the end to wake people up to how short the time is until our Lord returns and also cause them to see how fragile our bodies are and how easy it is for any of us to suddenly face the Lord and his judgment. And we will be prepared to point those people to Jesus. And we will minister to each other and to people out there, physically and emotionally and, especially, spiritually, so that God's will may be done in all this. But above all else, we will trust that Jesus is with us. He is in control. All he does, works for our good. That is his promise, the promise the Savior who died and rose for us. Amen.