

4th Sunday of Epiphany January 29, 2023

THE GREATER DANGER

Matthew 14:22-33

Scripture Readings

1 Kings 19:9-19

1 Corinthians 3:1-11

Hymns

370, 649, 396, 47

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) unless otherwise noted

+ *In the Name of Jesus Christ* +

Prayer of the Day: *Almighty and most merciful God, preserve us from all harm and danger that we, being ready in both body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish what You want done; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.*

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (NIV)

Dear fellow Christians, dear fellow redeemed:

You remember it, right? The story of flight 1549 seemed like something right out of the movies. I'm talking about how "Sully" Sullenberger safely landed an Airways jet plane on the Hudson River, miraculously saving 155 people from an almost certain watery death. We admire those with nerves of steel who know just what to do in a crisis situation. We thank God for those who know how to keep people safe in a time of danger.

Usually when we think of danger, we think of threats to our physical well-being. Seldom do people, including many Christian people, consider the dangers that threaten their souls. But how many people on board flight 1549 do you think knew Jesus Christ as their Savior? The greater danger for many on that plane was that if they had died in the crash, they would then have had to face their Maker without having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

In the hymn, “*I walk in danger all the way*,” the hymn writer is reminding us of the spiritual dangers that **believers** face on board the flight that takes them from this world into the next. The dangers are real. And, although we may not always be consciously aware of them, our pilot Jesus is. Jesus is fully alert to what threatens to sink our relationship with him and rob us of eternal life. On the basis of today’s text, we want to look at three of these dangers more closely, under the theme: THE GREATER DANGER 1. The Danger of a Polluted Faith (v.22) 2. The Danger of an Overwhelmed Faith (vv.25-27) 3. The Danger of an Unfocused Faith (vv. 28-32)

I. The Danger of a Polluted Faith (v.22)

We consider first of all the danger of our faith becoming polluted by the corrupting influences of the world. Now where do we find any mention of that in our text? In the first verse, where we read: “***Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side...***” (v. 22). Why did Jesus **immediately make** the disciples get into the boat? Obviously Jesus wanted them to leave from where they were at, and to leave fast. There is a profound sense of urgency in his words. Essentially the Lord is telling them, “There is danger here, and you need to get out of here right now!”

What’s going on? Did the Lord know that an earthquake was about to hit? Or that a legion of Roman soldiers was about to descend on the place with slashing swords and killing arrows? No. The answer is found when we compare Scripture with Scripture. Jesus had just miraculously fed the 5,000, and when we turn over to John, chapter 6, verse 15 we read: “***Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.***”

Is a light bulb starting to turn on? After the miracle feeding, the multitude wanted to make Jesus a bread king, a one-man welfare agency if you will. In other words, they were looking at Jesus as someone who could fulfill their sinful lusts for wealth, pleasure and power. They were not interested in the forgiveness He was offering their souls. They cared nothing for the hope of heaven He was holding out to them. They had no time for the new life of daily repentance he was calling them to live.

Here’s the point: Jesus perceived that the faith of his disciples was in danger of being polluted by the worldly thinking of the multitude. The disciples’ faith in Him as Savior from sin, death, and hell was at risk of being contaminated due to the influence of this carnally minded crowd. That’s why He told them to leave!

Friends, it should make us stand up and take notice how deeply concerned Jesus was over this spiritual danger that threatened the faith of his disciples. Can He be any less concerned about the dangers we face in this regard? He loved His disciples dearly. He loves us no less dearly. And, because He loves us with pure and perfect love, He urgently warns us of the spiritual pollution to which we are exposed today.

Sadly, I don’t believe that very many Christians take every seriously the faith-damaging influences that surround us in this present age. I wonder how seriously you and I take them.

How many, for example, pay attention when the Lord warns us over and over again in His Word to avoid those who teach contrary to His Word? Do we really understand how even one false teaching has the power, if believed, to eventually spoil our faith? Urgently Jesus says, “*Don’t sit at the feet of false teachers! Don’t hang your hat where any twisting of My precious Word is tolerated.*”

Or what about the music we listen to? If we don’t think that a steady diet of godless lyrics will have any effect on our relationship with Christ, we’re fooling ourselves.

Or if we think nothing will happen to our faith if we can continue to hang around that certain person whose speech and lifestyle is the exact opposite of life in the Spirit, we are walking on a dangerous path.

Luther says, “*We can’t keep the birds from flying overhead, but we don’t have to build a nest on top of our heads.*” Yes, we are in the world, but we don’t have to invite the world into our hearts and into our homes. The gutter is there but we don’t have to lie down in it. We wouldn’t dream of allowing our children or ourselves to eat spoiled food. Are we equally concerned about the spiritual food we allow ourselves to eat? Jesus is concerned.

II. The Danger of an Overwhelmed Faith (vv.25-27)

A second spiritual danger our text warns us against is the danger of our faith being overwhelmed by fear. The disciples were obviously in some danger out on the Sea of Galilee. The storm was bad and they were still many miles from shore. Whatever fear they were experiencing only increased when they saw what they thought was a ghost walking on the water. They became, in fact, terrified out of their minds.

In many ways we are in the same “boat” as the disciples. We live in a stormy, uncertain time. Collapsing supply chains, collapsing morals, collapsing marriages, may have us wondering how long our nation and local communities can stay afloat. Each of us has personal issues which make us uptight, cause us to lose sleep, and make our stomachs churn with worry. Do health issues, relationship issues, money issues, job concerns, or a guilty conscience make you afraid? We’d all be lying if we said, “No, never.”

But when we find ourselves in a state of fear and worry, the greatest danger does not come from the thing we’re afraid of. The much greater danger is the fear itself. When Jesus walked on the water to the disciples he was coming to rescue them. Yes, He would rescue them from the storm, but He was much more concerned about rescuing them from the storm in their hearts. He realized that the physical danger from the water was nothing compared to the spiritual danger that was lapping at their souls. Fear is the exact opposite of faith. Fear is a refusal to put our lives in the strong arms of God’s love. Fear, if not checked, and overcome by God’s gracious Spirit, can lead to despair, to hopelessness. It can literally drown our Christian faith.

Notice that before Jesus ever deals with the storm, He deals with the fear that threatened to overwhelm their faith. He rescues their faith with His Word, saying: “***Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid!***” (v. 27).

The Word of God is the only real solution to a fearful heart. The Word of God shows us that our Lifeguard can walk on water. The Word tells us that our God loved us enough to die for us, to take our sins upon Himself, and to suffer the hell we all deserved. God assures us in His Word that whatever storm we must yet pass through, with Jesus we will make it safely to the other shore.

III. The Danger of an Unfocused Faith (vv. 28-32)

Finally the third danger to our faith our text warns us against is the danger of an unfocused faith. That brings us to Peter. Peter was a man of action. Peter also suffered from foot-in-mouth-disease. Peter always seemed to leap before he looked.

Peter was obviously impressed with the LORD’s ability to walk on water. He wondered if he could do the same. Jesus invites him to come out to him. Peter does. For a while everything is going fine. He’s walking on water. But then he looks away from Jesus at the raging wind, and starts to sink.

What was Peter's problem? Why did he start to sink? He lost focus. He would do the same the night Jesus was arrested. When his faith was put to the test, he sank by denying his Lord three times. In both cases Peter forgot that a faith that stays afloat is a faith that is focused completely on the LORD Jesus. You see, Peter tended to trust in his own strength when it came to being faithful to His LORD. That's what made him sink. That's what made him deny Christ, and nearly lose his faith. His focus was on himself, not on his LORD.

This is a danger we all face. We can start to think that because we were confirmed once, or that our name is on the church membership list, or because we had a Christian upbringing, or because we're faithful and active members of our church, that we'll be okay. We can proudly start to believe that we can walk on top of whatever Satan throws our way. We look at others who have fallen away, and somehow we believe that'll never happen to me. I'm not like the others. I'll never commit adultery. I'll never do drugs. I'll never stop going to church and hearing God's Word.

We must remember we have the same weak flesh that everybody else has. It doesn't matter if you're the pastor of the congregation, a member on one of the boards, or one of the Sunday School teachers. Paul says to every believer: ***"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. Take heed where you stand lest you fall."*** (1 Corinthians 10:12) Only Jesus, through His Spirit powered Word and Sacrament, can hold up our faith, and keep us walking safely toward Him and life eternal.

We belong to a LORD who cares deeply about our faith. Just as He did not hesitate to reach out to Peter, so He is there every moment of everyday to rescue us. Sometimes He gently scolds us in love with the words, ***"O you of little faith!"*** (v. 31) But He is always willing and ready to forgive us when we let the world pollute our faith, to comfort us when we let fear overwhelm our trust in Him, and to re-focus us when we forget how much we need Him and His Word to stay the course.

The spiritual dangers are real. Do not take them lightly. But while the dangers are great, they cannot overpower the love and mercy of our Crucified and Risen Savior. Put your confidence in Him and His Word, and He will get you safely to that better shore. AMEN!

—**Pastor Michael Wilke**

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