

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Matthew 8:23–27
by Peter Bockoven

23 Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. **24** Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. **25** The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” **26** He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. **27** The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”

- I. If you were to ask a handful of strangers: “What is the most pressing problem facing humanity?” I expect you would receive many different answers. Would fear of death be one of them? Maybe not. Modern technology (some might say) has removed that fear. Sicknesses that were formerly death-sentences are now routinely treated. Life expectancies have generally increased. So, many people do not regularly think about the fact that they are mortal. And therefore, they are not greatly afraid of death, on a daily basis at least.
- II. But maybe you would get fear of death as an answer. Granted we’ve progressed in some ways. But we are still not free from the fear of death. Various events in life can awaken this fear in us—despite the blessings of modern technology. So long as the world endures, before Christ’s final return, and death is destroyed forever, people will, at various times, have fear over death.
- III. Thank God, then, that our Gospel lesson addresses our fear of death. At this point in Matthew’s gospel, Christ is still in the early portions of his Galilean ministry. He’s called some disciples. He’s been preaching, teaching, performing miracles. The crowds are excited to hear him. So excited, as the verses immediately before this reading describe, that some want to join Christ and become more of his public disciples. But the Lord curbs their excitement. He says to one man, “The Son of Man does not have a place to lay his head.” To another, who had to bury his dead relatives before following Christ, he says, “Let the dead bury their dead.” In other words, being a disciple of Christ is going to involve trouble and sacrifice.
- IV. And immediately afterwards, he goes to cross the sea with his disciples in the boat; to drive home this point to them by experience; to teach them to trust in him in the face of trouble and the fear of death. So they all enter the boat. And after Christ had fallen asleep, a great storm overtakes them. It begins to flood the boat with water. The disciples begin to fear for their life. So they wake Christ up, and ask him to save them. And he responds by saying that they were of little faith: for why were they afraid?
- V. But why does the Lord speak to them so? In what way were they of little faith? Didn’t they simply ask the Lord for help when they sensed they were in danger?

Isn't that what Christ himself did before his crucifixion, in Gethsemane? He foresaw his crucifixion, was troubled, and prayed to his father for help. Yet he was not of little faith, but of perfect faith.

- VI. When we compare the disciples here, with Christ in Gethsemane, we see that there is a difference between acknowledging one's trouble and asking God for help, and being *fearful*. When we are afraid, we are to flee to God for help, and to be confident that he will indeed help us; not to spiral out of control in hopelessness, as if God won't deliver us. But what a difficult thing this is to do! Sometimes we ignore the reasons we have for hope; and instead focus on the things that make us fearful and despairing. How can we be saved from fearfulness? How do we get out of the pit of despair? Not by looking inside of us, as if we had the power to do it; but by looking outside of us.
- VII. But before we answer how we can get out of fearfulness we need to recognize how we get there in the first place. Why were the disciples afraid of death? And why are we often? Certainly we can sympathize with the disciples. A storm on the water is a frightening thing, even today. How much more so, in the ancient world, in what we presume to be a small, wooden boat. But, didn't the disciples have Christ with them in the boat? Didn't they remember the miracles he performed; that this man had divine power? That he was God's Son? Sometimes we might think the disciples were foolish for being so fearful when Christ was right by them.
- VIII. But we have the benefit of hindsight. The disciples in this moment did not. We see more clearly than they did in this moment, because we have observed Christ's ministry accomplished in full, in the record of Holy Scripture. They did not. There were still many things that they had to learn about who Christ was, and what he would do. They didn't yet recognize the whole truth about Christ. That would come later with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the Lord calls them "of little faith." They were fearful because there were still many things they didn't recognize about him.
- IX. The disciples illustrate for us, then, a cause of the fear of death: *not recognizing something about Christ*. The disciples saw Christ asleep, and maybe thought incorrectly that, unless he woke up, he could not save them. So they failed to recognize that *Christ was all-powerful*. Or maybe they thought that, unless he were awake, he did not know the danger that they were in. So they failed to recognize that he was *present with them*. Or maybe, if they did recognize these things, they thought they had to plead with Christ and convince him to save them, wondering whether or not he *loved and cared* for them.
- X. These three things must stay together: Christ is almighty; he present, with you; and he loves you. If we forget any one of these things, that's a recipe for fear of death.
- XI. If I forget that Christ is almighty, I may wonder if he's even able to help me in the troubles that I face in this life; if he can help me conquer death; if he can give me resurrection from the dead again. If I forget that he loves me, I may wonder if he

even cares about my troubles or fears. And if I forget that he's present with me, well, then I might consider myself left alone against my troubles and fears.

XII. These three things, tied together—Christ's power, his presence, and his love—save us from fear. Christ is the powerful one, who allows trouble and fear to come my way, to teach me and to instruct me; the powerful one, who overcame death itself by rising from the dead; who gives us also the power to rise from the dead. Christ is the present one, in his Word and Sacraments, granting me his grace, standing by me in all my troubles and fears; Christ is the loving one, who by his power, and by his presence, will give me the victory, even over death itself, when he brings us to life with God in heaven, and when he returns to raise us back to life again.

XIII. That is why Christ led his disciples into the boat, fell asleep, and allowed a storm to frighten his disciples. He was preparing them for their journey ahead, especially after he ascended into heaven. He wanted them to learn, by experience, these essential truths: that he, even when he went up into heaven after his passion, is always the all-powerful one, the present one, the loving one, who will save his people in all their troubles, even in the fear of death. And such is the case, still, for you and for me.

XIV. And how are we sure of that? Our gospel is strikingly similar to the story of the prophet Jonah. Jonah is fleeing from the Lord, sailing on a boat. A great storm overtakes him while he's sleeping. The other men on the boat perceive that Jonah is the cause of their danger. So they throw him into the waters, and the storm recedes. Though Christ is not thrown into the sea in our gospel, we can still see that he is the greater Jonah. Just as the men were saved by Jonah being thrown into the storm, so also are we saved by Christ being thrown into the storm. He took upon himself all of the troubles that we face. By his crucifixion, he was thrown into the storm of death and God's wrath, to remove the fear of death and God's wrath from us. By Christ's death, our death is turned not into a peaceful thing that we can joyfully look forward to, since it is the pathway to eternal life. Therefore, in Christ, we are confident of God's power, presence, and love for us. And therefore, in all of our troubles, in all of our fears, we can flee to Christ for help and deliverance, confident that he who sometimes allows fear and trouble to come my way, does so in his loving will to teach me to trust him; and will ultimately deliver me from all trouble and fear. Amen.