

Sermon – “Bringing Good News”

Sunday, August 9, 2020

Scripture Readings: Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

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Our first reading for today comes from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. This comes from a section where he is contrasting legal obedience, as an impossible means of earning salvation, with faith in the Lord whose salvation is among us all—and therefore whose salvation is meant to be proclaimed to all. Hear now these words from Romans chapter 10, verses 5 through 15.

*<sup>5</sup> Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” <sup>6</sup> But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) <sup>7</sup> “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup> But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); <sup>9</sup> because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.*

*<sup>11</sup> The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” <sup>12</sup> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. <sup>13</sup> For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*

*<sup>14</sup> But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? <sup>15</sup> And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”*

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Our second reading gives an account of Jesus spending some time alone and then rejoining the disciples following the death of John the Baptist and immediately after the miraculous feeding of five thousand people with just a few fish and loaves. Hear God’s Word to you in these words from the Gospel According to Matthew, in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 22 through 33.

*<sup>22</sup> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup> but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup> And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup> But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”*

<sup>28</sup> Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” <sup>29</sup> He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” <sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” <sup>32</sup> When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup> And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

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It is commonly recognized that one does not wish to be the bearer of bad news. At best, one has to endure the awkward discomfort of creating discomfort in someone else. Sometimes it is dreadful news, and it’s more than awkward. But the main thing people think of when wishing to avoid bearing bad news comes out in the phrase, “Don’t shoot the messenger!”

Obviously it is unwise to treat poorly the person who brings you bad news, at least if you want anyone else witnessing the scene to continue to bring you honest facts, and thus keep having a good picture of what is going on. But there’s a reason the phrase exists, and that the phenomenon is spoken of all the way back to the ancient Greeks and probably before: receiving bad news makes us miserable, and we want to lash out, and sometimes in that moment it is very hard not to conflate the actual coming on of a harmful thing with its arrival in our awareness. We don’t want the facts to be true, so we don’t enjoy hearing such facts, and so we get angry that such facts are brought to us, and the anger falls on the one who brought them.

On the contrary, we much enjoy the opportunity to be the one to break good news to someone. I am sure it is quite relieving and an enjoyable part of the day for the person at the service desk counter to inform someone waiting that his or her car has been fixed much more easily and inexpensively than it was feared would be the case. Or, the surgery was a success! The war is over, and it is won!

There are surely mishaps in this area as well—one recalls the story of the death of King Saul in the end of the book of 1 Samuel and the beginning of 2 Samuel. Saul had driven David out and sought to kill him, and David had gone to live among the Philistines, who now were warring against Saul. Saul’s army was overtaken, the king was wounded, and after pleading with his armor bearer to end his misery, Saul took his own life. But the man who showed up in David’s camp later to tell David that his conflict with Saul was now over embellished the story, inflating his own role, and claimed to have personally killed Saul and brought his crown to David. This was a mistake. David’s response to hearing that this man had killed the Lord’s anointed king was to have him killed in return. Sometimes what we think is going to be good news is not.

But generally, we expect good news to be good in the telling as well.

This is part of the reason the sharing of *the Good News*, with a capital “G”, the unveiling of the Gospel to the world, is sometimes confusing for its complex messiness. It’s hard for us to receive, even though it is goodness. At bottom, there is a difficulty we *all* have with receiving the Gospel: with respect to God, we aren’t just hostages awaiting rescue from this rebellious world which has fallen away from God and swept us and everyone else up as victims, although we are that. We are also rebels ourselves, runaways, and so it isn’t always easy to hear as good news the idea that the insurrection has been defeated and we can go back home.

There is a simpler hardship illustrated in today's story from the book of Matthew, with its disciples alone on the boat, then fearful of the storm; accosted by an apparent ghost, only to meet Christ, after which Peter jumps straight with both feet into belief...and then still falters when meeting the wind, before Jesus catches him, and he finally stills the wind altogether.

We are every bit like this. We are wrapped up in the world around us, taken in by it and tied to its manner of thinking in ways that make us unprepared to immediately grab hold of the lifeline when it is tossed to us, or even to immediately recognize it as that. Nor do we hold onto it with certainty even once we've got it in our hands. The Good News gets overshadowed for us. It looks like a ghost, something to be feared. It flees away from our minds the moment our childlike selves remember something we're facing that seems big and scary.

These men had just witnessed Jesus feeding five thousand men and their families with five loaves and two fish.<sup>1</sup> They had seen miracle cures.<sup>2</sup> They had even already once seen a storm cease at his command.<sup>3</sup> But here was a new storm, and it was a challenge to keep faith all over again. They had seen his power over the spirits, and his faithfulness to them, sending them out to the world to cast out demons in his name, but here was a new ghost, and they were afraid all over again. Even in the very moment of the triumph of his faith—walking on the surface of the water—when Peter remembers the strength of the wind (as if a moment earlier when he was walking just fine the same wind were not there) he becomes frightened and loses hold of what he had going.

Luckily Jesus never loses hold of him, bearing him up once again, after all that, and escorting him safely back to the boat, where he brings to an end the threat perceived by all the others as well, both indulging, after a fashion, their fearfulness, and also demonstrating to them, again, its needlessness in the face of the saving power of the Lord.

This is one of the things that makes me thankful to understand that our Lord understands what it is to be human. Our strength and our attention wax and wane. Our ability to stick with something is weak. We declare in this room that we believe in our Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, next to whom no force or power on earth can stand for a second, and whose salvation is more important and real than any promise or danger this world can offer us; and then before we have even walked out the door we have ten times in our minds already set aside that firm conviction upon remembering something we are to face later in the day or the week. We get reminded of the things we fear, or which tempt us, and we forget who it was that told us to get out of that boat, and we start to sink. We cry out again, and are lifted up again, and so we live our lives.

This does surely give us reason for humility, at least, and humility is a good thing when bringing a message of any sort. For we are not just recipients, we are bearers of the message as well. We are on the mission of the church, the mission to every corner of our neighborhood and every corner of our earth. We are commissioned to share the love of Christ everywhere.<sup>4</sup> This seems to be an inescapable part of the Christian life.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:14-21.

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 4:23-25, 8:1-17, 8:28-34, 9:2-8, 9:18-34, 12:9-13, 12:15, and 12:22-23.

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 8:23-27.

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 28:16-20, among others.

But we've got a model for it. And we would not do badly to follow that model. It is one of grace and patience, of meeting people in their struggles and lifting our them up by the hand. It is one of demonstrated love and a presence that serves and heals. We have received this, and we are to go out and do the same.

We would do well to remember and be humble in another way, also. We should always remember, as we walk out into the world as representatives of Christ, that others might well see in us a ghost, too. Plenty of people have had experiences which leave them unprepared to see Jesus Christ or his followers showing up as an unmitigated good. For some, inter-religious hatred has done that. More commonly for someone in this part of the world, it is a personal background story, a damaging parental or other personal relationship with someone who harmfully represents the church to him or her. Any of you who have ever struggled with being a part of the church, whether you actually left and came back or not, can relate at least somewhat to this, if you take the time to think about it. A great many of us are, in some way, refugees *from* the church who ultimately and thankfully were by grace able to take their refuge *in* the church. So when someone is cold to the message of grace we bear, or fears it, as we would fear a ghost coming upon us in a storm, perhaps we can sympathize, and pray to keep our gentleness and consideration about us.

It is a messy thing, the world in which we live, and our ears are sometimes pounded so by the howling, stormy wind that we don't hear and don't understand. But the Good News is here, and the Good News is brought by—and the Good News *is*—a Lord who reaches down and catches up the faltering one who cries out for help. May all of us, called and sent in Christ's name be given that assurance every time we need it, and take it with us to all the world. Amen.