

“Depart, or, Be Not Far From Me?”

Have you ever had one of those terrifying dreams where you’re trying to run away from some danger – but you can’t – your feet won’t move, it’s like running in mud, the harder you try the slower you go – and the danger is getting closer and closer?

Whether it is a grizzly bear, a shark, a fire or a tornado – you just want to get as far away as possible. The closer in proximity you are, the greater the danger.

But what about the opposite? How far do you want to be from the rescue unit or the hospital when your heart stops? How far do you want Dad or Mom to be away when you’re scared? How far do you want the bottom of the lake to be from your toes when you can’t swim anymore? “Not far” is the answer, and the closer the better.

In this Season of Epiphany – and again here today on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – the Lord, through His Word, is revealing to us His power and His presence. We are being shown that the all-powerful God and Lord is near to us. Now, the question is - does that cause you fear, or relief?

The Word that God speaks to you today reveals a great and miraculous catch of fish. But it begins on the shore, with Jesus and the crowds. In order to put a little distance between Him and the crowds – He gets into Simon Peter’s boat and has him put out a little from the land so that He might teach the crowds.

Having finished His lesson with words, Jesus puts a lot more distance between Him and the crowds – telling Simon to “put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” It’s time for an object lesson.

The same powerful Word that speaks to the crowds on the shore – has now told the professional-fisherman-Simon what to do. It’s not like Simon hasn’t been trying – they’ve been fishing all night with nothing to show for it – “But at your word I will let down the nets.”

And what Simon and the others are given to see – is not just that Jesus is God – but the power of His Word. The boats are filled – so much that they begin to sink. And Simon says – “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

For Simon, the presence of the Lord is a cause for fear. He needs to put a little distance between Him and the Lord – and not just a little, but a lot! “Depart from me” – go away Jesus – I’m afraid, I can’t handle this – I’m a sinner, and I’m way too close to you, the Holy, sinless, and all-powerful God and Lord!

But for Simeon (who we heard about last week), it’s just the opposite. He’s waiting for this same Lord to come – and when He comes into the Temple, Simeon can’t get close enough – he takes the Lord Jesus into his arms. He too speaks of departing – but it’s not because of fear.

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.” It’s not the Lord who is to go away – it’s Simeon, who can die in peace – because his Savior has come near to him, and his eyes have seen his salvation.

Folks, you are sitting here in church – much like Simon in the boat and Isaiah in the Temple. What if you could see with your eyes the very things that Simon and Isaiah were given to see? What if you could see God – that He’s right here in this temple – that Jesus is right here “with you”?

Would you be like Simon or Simeon? Would it be fear, or peace? Would you try to run away – or eagerly await the consolation that He brings?

While you do not see Jesus today – you ARE standing before Him. And you know that on the Last Day – you will stand before Him, and see Him face to face. For many, and even Christians, that brings fear – attempts to flee, to run away, to depart.

I wonder if that’s why some of the baptized stay away from the Divine Service – because they know, maybe unconsciously, that the Lord IS HERE. They fear His holiness because they know they are sinners – and so they flee – which is only denying, and delaying the inevitable. All sinners will stand before the Lord – if not today – then most certainly on the Last Day.

Knowledge of our sin brings that same fear – just like Isaiah, and Simon. “Woe to me,” we cry. And so, we do what our first parents did – we run away from God – we try to hide from Him like Adam and Eve – and we try to cover up our naked sinfulness.

So why are Simon and Isaiah so afraid on the one hand, and Simeon is not? Or, like the psalmist in the Introit who cries out – “O God, be NOT FAR from me; O my God, make haste to help me!”

Is it that Simon is a sinner, and Simeon and the psalmist are not? NO, all are sinners – but Simon and Isaiah are focused on who they are as sinners – and Simeon and the psalmist are focused on who God is.

But that’s not the full answer either – because if you focus on God as the One who is all-powerful and all-knowing – the Lord whose wrath is stirred up by sin – who is a just God and must punish all sin --- then you still end up in fear.

But if the Lord is the One who comes to help you – who brings consolation to His people – who comes to sinners to redeem them, to rescue them from their sin, to deliver them from the fear of judgment and death --- then you cry out that He would “make haste.” Hurry up God, come to me, come CLOSE to me, the closer the better! Then, with that Lord, there is peace.

That is why we sing in the Gradual: “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name.” Do you know what His glory is – the glory due His name? It is His glory to have mercy on sinners – to be gracious to us – that is, to give us His love, even though we as sinners do not deserve His love.

That’s why we cry out in the liturgy – Lord, have mercy on me. We cry out Hosanna – Lord, “save me now!” For we ARE standing in His presence. The very Son of God has come from heaven to earth – He has come in human flesh – the Word became flesh and dwelt among us --- all so that we might have peace.

Dearly beloved, Peace be with you/ Peace be with you through that powerful Word of Jesus, the Word made flesh who stands in your midst – who says, “I forgive you all your sins” – you are set free from fear – and consoled by my love.

He has answered your prayer in the Collect of the Day, giving you “the true faith” so that, “relying on the hope of [His] grace, [you] may ever be defended by [His] mighty power – even as you await the day when you shall see Him face to face – and receive the fullness of His glory, His grace everlasting. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.