

“It is I”

In studying our Gospel reading from St. Mark – I couldn’t help but think of how it sounds like the Ascension of Our Lord. A precursor, a prequel, a foretaste of the Ascension to come. This is what I mean.

Before Jesus goes away, He takes care of His disciples. He puts them in the boat – and, as you may have heard before – the Church is often depicted as a boat, or a ship, or an Ark, if you will.

Then Jesus “went up” – He went up on the mountain “to pray.” Again, it sounds like our Risen Lord who has ascended into heaven – and even now, sits at the right hand of God the Father, almighty interceding for us, praying for us.

For a period of time, Jesus is gone – that is, He’s not seen by the disciples – as far as they know, He is far away. They are alone, in the boat, left by themselves to battle the wind and the waves that are against them. It’s dark. It’s painful. It’s a struggle.

And then, when Jesus does come to them – it’s as if He is going to pass by – leaving them to face the struggles alone.

Jesus comes to them – but His identity is hidden. The disciples don’t realize who this is coming to them. They think it’s a ghost. They’re terrified. They cry out in fear! And “immediately” the Lord acts on their behalf. He speaks to them – “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

Jesus reveals Himself by His Word. He gets into the boat. He’s with His disciples (in the midst of the Church) and everything is restored.

You are disciples of Jesus Christ who live this biblical account each day. Your Lord HAS ascended into heaven – He is hidden from your sight – and your attention is captured by the things you see and experience in your life.

However, what is true, is that Jesus has placed you into His Church. Baptized into Christ, you live within the Ark of your salvation – even as Christ now sits at the Father’s right hand – ruling and reigning over all things for your benefit. What is true is that Jesus prays for you – He intercedes on your behalf before your Father in heaven. He may be hidden from your sight and experience – but He has not forgotten about you.

But it sure seems like that from time to time, doesn't it? Like the disciples in the boat – you are “making headway painfully.” It's a struggle. The wind is against you – the devil is against you, perverting God's Word – so that you are tossed to and fro by every wind and wave of false doctrine.

The world leans on you pretty hard as well. I can't help but use the reading from Genesis as an example. The Lord has given Noah and all people the sign of the rainbow to comfort you. It is a reminder of both His destruction of evil – and His salvation of those who trust in Him.

But the world has taken the rainbow and turned it into a sign for a wickedness to be accepted. When you see a rainbow, or a rainbow flag – sadly, you are not reminded of the Lord's promise – but how the winds of the world are against you.

And there you are, the Christian, in the boat – struggling. What am I to believe? What is good, and what is evil? And where is the Lord in all of this? Has He left me alone, to fend for myself?

The Lord SEES the struggles of His disciples, and He comes to them – not just the disciples in the boat – but He SEES you, and your struggles. If the Lord came to you today, like He did then, walking on the water – you too would be terrified.

The truth is that Jesus does come to His disciples today – but His identity is hidden. You cannot see Him with your eyes. Your own reason says “He's in heaven, so He can't be here.” Your experience often suggests that the Lord would prefer to pass you by.

But as it was in the beginning – as it was then for those disciples – so it is now, for you. The Lord SEES your struggles – He COMES to you – and He REVEALS Himself to you by His Word. Jesus Himself speaks – He SAYS to you, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

Lutherans take the Word of God seriously – not just as the standard of truth (an objective truth) – but as the very Word of God by which He reveals that which we cannot know from our own reason or experience.

It may seem like there is no God – or, if there is one – that He doesn't know, or care, what is going on in your life – that He has left you to face the struggles alone. But nothing could be farther from the truth – and His Word reveals the truth.

He not only sent His Son to suffer and die on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for your sins, and for your salvation – but He comes to you now in these days – He is present in the midst of you – so that you may take heart, and not be afraid.

THAT is a great mystery – that Jesus Christ is present here today – to serve you. He who sees your needs – comes today to provide you with what is needed. He knows your wickedness, and the burden of sin that weighs you down. He knows that the winds of the devil, the world, and your own sinful nature are against you --- and so He comes to you.

With the Father and the Holy Spirit – He reveals that all your sin has been taken away – not just announcing this forgiveness, but forgiving you this day (releasing you from sin). What is hidden His Word reveals – that He gives you His resurrected and ever-living Body and Blood – because He is “for you” – to heal and restore you.

Gathered in the Ark of His Church – the Lord delivers you from the wickedness which is all around, and from the punishment that each one of us deserves. Like Noah and his family, He brings you into a new creation – one cleansed by water and His Word.

The rainbow is not given just to remind you of what the Lord did in the past – but what He promises for these days. So also, His Word and Sacraments are given to you – so that you may know and believe that your Savior is with you – caring and providing for you --- so that you may “Take heart.”

Dearly beloved, “do not be afraid” – for the Lord Jesus Christ is with you. Amen.

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