

13 July 2003  
Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

“A God Who Stays and Gives”

Text: Mark 4:35-41

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Holy Gospel that we heard today, Jesus *rebuked* the wind and the sea. He did not rebuke His disciples. That is an important point that we need to realize, to understand our Saviour and why He is here for us. He *rebuked* the wind and the sea when He told them “**Peace! Be still!**” He did not rebuke His disciples when He said to them, “**Have you still no faith?**”

Yet I think that we sometimes hear these words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel as law, as rebuke or accusation, as an indictment. . . . **Have you still no faith?** Well what’s wrong with you? **Have you still no faith?** Then get with the program and work harder at it! **Have you still no faith?** Well you better work some up quick, or you’re not worthy to be with Me. . . . Is that what Jesus meant here with these words? Is that what Jesus was saying to His frightened disciples, who, harried and troubled by a storm that was so intense that it scared the bejeebers out of experienced sea-faring fishermen, that they went running and screaming to Him for help? Is Jesus really chastising His disciples here, even as their hearts are pounding through their chests?

If so, then what about us? What about when we are frightened by the troubles of life? What about when we are confused and scared? What about when we are doubting and lack faith and run to Jesus for help? Is this the kind of reception we should expect? A Jesus who may help, but at the same time berates us for our lack of faith? Who rebukes us for not trying harder? Who is disappointed in us? . . . I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I would want to run to a Saviour like that! That kind of reception would make me think twice before asking Jesus for help, making sure that I first have my faith and my house in order so that I am *worthy* of His help, and will not receive His rebuke when I go to Him.

But is that how Jesus wants us to think? Is that what these words mean? Some would say yes, that is exactly what these words mean. We are to make ourselves worthy. We are to work in ourselves a stronger faith. And we are to work harder at our Christian life until we are all that we can be. Some would say . . .

But I submit to you that that is not at all what those words mean, and that such thinking will not make us better or stronger Christians but will, in fact, drive us to despair and failure. Because first of all, while certainly Christ wants us to have more faith and a stronger faith in Him, our faith is not something that we can do, or that we can increase and strengthen by ourselves. And so for Jesus to be telling us to work on and increase our faith is for Jesus to be telling us to do something that is impossible for us to do! In the explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed we confess that "*I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him.*" No, faith is a **gift**, not something that Jesus **commands** us to do. . . . And second, I do not think that these words are words of rebuke because if they were, it would be a great confusion of Law and Gospel. Because the Law is not given to kick us when we're down, or to frighten us more when we are scared, or to chastise us when know how helpless and vulnerable we are. No, it is exactly at those moments that God gives us His Gospel – that He would strengthen us in our doubts and fears; that He would grant forgiveness when our sins and inability are weighing heavy on us; that He would be for us all that we are not, and all that we lack. That we rely on Him for everything. . . . No, He does not rebuke us when we come to Him for help. That is the very thing that He wants us to do!

So then, how are we to understand these words and this Holy Gospel that we heard?

Well first of all, appreciate the fact of how wonderful it is that Jesus doesn't here walk away from His disciples. He doesn't give up on them. After asking them "***Have you still no faith?***" He doesn't throw up His hands and jump out of the boat, muttering and mumbling to Himself about how dense and hopeless these guys are! He could have! He was able to walk on water, right? He could have walked right away from the boat after calming the storm and started over with 12 guys who might catch on a little faster! . . . But He doesn't. Because this is why He came. He came because we do not have faith. He came to give us faith and to teach us and reveal to us exactly who He is. And He doesn't come just once, but time and time again. And so He is patient with His disciples and bears with them. He teaches them, leads them, and guides them. He gives them their faith, but then doesn't leave them on their own, but strengthens it. Sending trials, sending suffering, sending challenges, sending opposition, all to strengthen their faith. And in the beginning, yes! what failures they are! But in the end, how **great** is their faith, to the point of *martyrdom*. And they can take no credit. They didn't do it! It is not their work. This is why Jesus came, and why He is with them.

And so too for us. Jesus is here for us and coming to us time and time again to give us faith and to strengthen our faith. Because on our own we have no faith. And so He comes to us here, in our boat, the Church. The place in the Church where you are sitting, where the pews are, is called the *nave*, which is the Latin word for boat, from which we

get our word *navy*. Here in the boat, Jesus is here with us. In Baptism, in His Word, in Absolution, in His Supper, giving faith and forgiveness; teaching us and revealing exactly who He is. He is patient with us and bears with us. He sends trials, and suffering, and challenges, and opposition. And in the face of these things, yes! what failures we are! How lacking in faith we often times are. But through it all Jesus is working, and teaching us not to rely on ourselves, but on Him. And He does not give up on you. He will not walk out on you. This is why He came, and why He is with us.

How wonderful that is and yet so hard to believe because how *utterly unlike* the way our world is! Where relationships and bonds are severed, it seems, over the smallest of disputes and differences. Friendships end, marriages end, pregnancies end, alliances end, commitments and promises end, the courts are filled with people suing each other. We seem to be a world of people all walking away from each other!

But Christ does not walk away. He doesn't get out of the boat, He doesn't leave His Church. He stays, and calms the storm. . . . And if we **still have no faith**, it is not an indictment, an accusation, or a rebuke *against* us – **it means that His work for us and for our salvation is not yet done**. That we still have no faith means not that He is leaving but *exactly the opposite*, that He is staying! And the One to whose voice the wind and the sea are subject is here to **serve us** with His power. To rescue us and be God for us. To use His power not against us, but **for us**. To use His power to conquer sin, to crush Satan, to defeat death, to rescue us from the gaping jaws of hell which are seeking to devour us! This is the One in the boat with us!

But when faced with this awesome power, notice what happens to the disciples – they are filled with great fear! When faced with the awesome power of the God of creation, who speaks and nature obeys, we cannot stand. Not one of us can. And so in order to be with us in power, and yet not frighten us, He hides His power in weakness. He comes as a man. He sleeps in the back of the boat. He is arrested and beaten and then crucified. But He showed His power no where so greatly as when He hung on the cross in weakness. For there He accomplished what no one else could – as we heard in the words of St. Paul, ***“He became sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** On the cross He paid the enormous price for our sins, so powerful was He in weakness. And when He died He slept again, like He did in the back of the boat, this time in the tomb. And then when He awoke – when He arose from death to life, we who were *perishing* in our trespasses and sins, were saved! The storms of our sins and the blustering wind of the devil's accusations were silenced, and there is now peace in Christ Jesus. The peace of sins forgiven. The peace of the promise of everlasting life. The peace of His Word spoken to us right before His ascension, ***“And lo, I am with you always.”***

And with us He is, in the boat, His Church. Here with His power hidden under things that look so weak – mere water, and words, and bread and wine, and frail pastors to give these gifts. But do not mistake the appearance for the reality! For Christ, your Saviour, is here, strong and powerful, not to accuse, but to give. Here not to condemn, but to forgive. Here not to indict, but to strengthen, and comfort, and give peace to His frightened, troubled children. . . . So have you still no faith? Have you little faith? Is your faith weak and battered? Then come, for your Saviour has come to you. Come bow your heads, bend your knees, open your mouths. Come and receive His gifts. Come and receive His forgiveness, life, and salvation. Come and receive all that He is and all that He has for you. For He is here for you. Here not to rebuke – but to save!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.