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Pentecost 9

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Not From Power, but From Promise”

Text: Mark 6:45-56 (Genesis 9:8-17; Ephesians 3:14-21)

(Thank you to the Rev. William Cwirla for some of the thoughts and phrases used in this sermon.)

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

Jesus had just fed over 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. That's the story that immediately precedes the Holy Gospel we heard today. We didn't hear that story last week because it was the day of commemoration for St. Mary Magdalene and we used those readings. It was a desolate place, Mark tells us, where all those people were, listening to Jesus teach. But though the disciples had no food and the people had only a miniscule amount of food, Jesus feeds them all. They all ate and were satisfied. There were even leftovers.

But while Jesus dismisses the crowds to return to their homes, there is another challenge awaiting the disciples. Jesus sends His disciples out across the Sea of Galilee while He goes off to pray. He will meet them on the other side, but for now He needed time with His Father; time to pray. And as you heard, a storm came up. The twelve weren't afraid of the storm - they *were* making headway, though it was slow and painful. So slow and painful, in fact, that a walking Jesus was able to catch up with them. *That's when you know you're slow, right? When you're riding your bike or in a traffic jam and even the walkers start passing you by!* So it was that night on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had caught up to them and was passing them by.

And here's the first very interesting thing about this story - ***Jesus meant to pass them by.*** Jesus wasn't coming out to help them or get into the boat with them. ***He meant to pass them by.*** Perhaps you've felt that way a time or two in your life, that Jesus was passing you by just when you needed Him the most; just when you needed Him to stop and help you through some storm or difficulty. And here it seems as if Jesus wanted them to see this - to see Him passing them by. For He passes close enough to be seen by them. Close enough that when He speaks He is heard by them. Close enough to be able to immediately get into the boat when they cry out in fear. He didn't have to pass by that closely; He could have gotten to the other side without them seeing Him. Which suggests there must have been some *purpose* for Jesus to do that. Something He wanted to teach them. And us.

And perhaps it is this: **that Jesus goes first**. Even though He had remained behind to pray and sent His disciples out ahead of Him, Jesus was going to be there for them when they arrived. *Jesus goes first*. They would not have to arrive and wait for Him, wondering what to do or how long He would take. *Jesus goes first*. He leads, He directs, we follow. And so wherever you go in life, whatever you face, it is not a place where Jesus is not. You do not have to wait for Him to arrive or wonder *if* He is going to arrive. *Jesus goes first*. And for you, that is true even when the journey in front of you is death. *Jesus goes first*. Remember what Jesus told His disciples right before His crucifixion? *I am going to prepare a place for you* (John 14). He goes before us through His own death to resurrection, to prepare the way and bring us along with Him. So that you will not face that day or that passage - a much more difficult struggle than what the disciples faced that day - so that you will not face that struggle alone. *Jesus goes first*. He is the Lord of creation and the Lord of life. The Lord of your life. When you die and when you rise, O child of God, Jesus will be there. With you.

So the disciples should have been filled with confidence and joy! The Jesus who just miraculously fed all those people is now going on ahead of them - He'll be waiting for them on the other side. That's a *good* thing. . . . But they're not confident. Instead they're scared. No more than that, they are *terrified*. Again, not at the storm - they were handling that okay. But because when they saw Jesus, **they thought they saw a ghost**.

Now it's easy for us to criticize the disciples here. *Really? A ghost? You stupid, ignorant, juvenile disciples!* But before you jump on that bandwagon, think about what rocks your boat and causes you panic and fear. What *spooks* you and causes you to panic, to disbelieve, to doubt God's goodness and love? A *ghostly* shadow on an x-ray? The *spectre* of what may happen in the future? A *phantom* danger that seemed very real to you at the time? It often doesn't take much to make us cry out in fear and wonder where God is and why He isn't helping us. It comes from that Old Man in each of us. The inner sinner in us that doesn't trust God or think He knows what He's doing or knows what we need *right now*. You've been there. I have too. When *God with us* seemed more like a ghost than a real presence . . .

And so Jesus gets into the boat with them. **Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid**, He says. Immediately the wind ceases and all is calm. They're not afraid anymore - it's not a ghost. *But they don't understand either*. They can't connect the dots just yet. The loaves and fishes, the calming of the winds and waves, Jesus walking on the water. They couldn't figure it all out. They were, Mark tells us, **utterly astounded**.

Utterly astounded . . . *because miracles are not enough*. Miracles reveal to us that Jesus is the Lord of creation, who has lordship over the sea and the wind, who can

walk on water, who can heal sicknesses and diseases by His Word or by His touch or even by someone touching the hem of His garment; that He is able to feed a multitude of people with just a little bit of food, and much, much more. But in all that awesome display of sheer divine power, *notice . . . there's no comfort, no confidence, no hope. The disciples are simply **utterly astounded**.*

Now miracles are nice, don't get me wrong. We often pray for miracles, don't we? And sometimes miracles happen! But what happens when the miracles don't come? Because that happens, too. When despite our prayers a loved one dies . . . when the troubles aren't going away . . . when God even *seems* to be using His power against you! What then? Or what about when we see the awesome power of tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis, or the awesome terror and death inflicted by a lone, crazed gunman? When we are **utterly astounded** at the power of God, the power of nature, the power of evil . . . *What should you think when weak little you is faced against all this awesome power?*

Well, if miracles are all you have, then truthfully, you won't know what to think. One moment God is for you, the next He seems against you. One moment He likes you, the next He seems to hate you. One moment He is feeding you, the next He seems like a ghost. His ways will **utterly astound** you and you won't know what's coming next. *Will He or won't He?*

You need *more* than miracles. You need to know that all of this awesome power is **for you**. *For you* not just some of the time, but all of the time. When the miracles come and when they don't. When there's peace or when there's tragedy. When you're in a desolate place or a green pasture. When your Saviour is with you in the boat or when He is passing by. That at all times and in all places, your Saviour is using His awesome power *for you*, to save you and do good for you, even when what is happening doesn't seem very good at all. **That's faith**. To know and believe that your Lord is good *all the time* - not just when things are good *in your opinion*.

That's what the disciples were still learning, and what you and I are still learning. *Always learning*. And it is why we need the promises of God to rely on.

For it's nice to hear and know about Jesus walking on the water in the wind at three in the morning, *but it's saving and faith-creating* to hear and know of Jesus coming to you *as He promised* in the water of your baptism, with the Spirit of God blowing in those waters to come to you and give you faith and make you a child of God, born from above. A child of God in the grace and care of your heavenly Father. Your heavenly Father who is perfect and perfect in all His ways and who will not let you down or let you go.

It's nice to hear and know also about Jesus feeding a great multitude out in a

desolate place with only five loaves of bread and two fish, *but it's saving and faith-sustaining* to hear and know of Jesus coming to you *as He promised* in the bread and wine of His Supper, with the very Body and Blood of your Saviour feeding you and strengthening you with the forgiveness of your sins. The forgiveness earned by the same Body and Blood of Jesus as He hung upon the cross for you. As He bore your sins to take your sins away. All of them. Nothing now to hold against you or to separate you from your Father and His love.

And so it is not the awesome power of God that gives us the faith and confidence and hope that we need. In fact, it took what we could call *an awesome display of weakness* to provide what you need the most - the weakness of the cross. Where Jesus did not use His awesome power as God and did not come down, but endured the condemnation of your sins, and laid down His life for you in your place. That is the one place Jesus would not pass by. He could have, but to go to the cross is why He came, why He was born, why He was in the boat that day. That you not just have a better or longer or easier life here on earth for a few years, but that you have an eternal life, with Him, forever.

And so the faith that endures through the good times and the bad times, the times when the miracles come and when they don't, that is confident in both peace and tragedy, is the faith that rests not on the awesome power of God, but on the promises of God.

That's what Noah needed too. He had just witnessed the awesome power of God in the flood, but what he needed was the promise. The promise of God of *never again*. Otherwise, Noah and those who would come after him would have to keep looking back over their shoulders, would keep wondering: is it going to happen again? Is it too sinful again? Is God going to act again? And just like with the disciples, there would be no confidence, no peace, no hope, just **utterly astounded** at the awesome power of God. But God pointed to the rainbow and promised Noah: *Never again. Don't be afraid.*

And that's the message of the cross for you, and the promise of the cross given to you here in Word and Sacrament: *Don't be afraid. Never again.* Your conscience may convict you, the world may attack you, your faith may waver and doubt, but the cross of your Saviour assures you that Jesus will not pass you by. And He promises that here in water and words and bread and wine, He and His cross are here for you. To forgive you, to strengthen you, to keep you, and to give you hope and confidence and life. That, as St. Paul said, ***you may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge - it's breadth and length and height and depth - and be filled with all the fullness of God.***

For He is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think. He points

you to the cross and says: *Don't be afraid. Never again.* He is able and He did it. He is able and He *promised - for you.*

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 through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.