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Propers 12 (Pentecost 10) Series B 2018

Phillip L. Brandt
Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – July 29 (Proper 12)

We have been dwelling on fear for these past two months and today's Gospel reading does not break that pattern. The disciples again are described as terrified. They are rowing into a stiff wind, a wind which allows them to make no progress when suddenly they see Jesus doing something miraculous. Are they relieved? No! They are terrified. They think he is something demonic, a ghost walking upon the water. They stop rowing and clutch one another in their terror. It seems as if Jesus had no intention of getting in that boat, but their fearful reaction forces a change of plan. What did he have in mind? We will have to talk more about that, but Mark is clear, he was intending to pass by.

In response to their terror Jesus gets into the boat, the strong wind stops, but they don't get where they were supposed to be going. He had sent them across to the safe territory of Bethsaida, but that is not where they end up. Instead they end up in Genesareth. Last time Jesus was on the other side of the lake he cast out a legion of demons into a herd of swine (Mark 5:1-20). At that point, when the locals saw the dead pigs and the cleansed demoniac, they had urged Jesus to go away. What will be the reaction this time? The careful reader might be expecting another sort of strong headwind in this part of the world.

It is not so. Jesus has already taken care of this, with the very demoniac whose healing caused the locals their fear in the first place. He has told the story of what happened to him, and God has used that most unlikely testifier to work a great change in their hearts and lives. Now, as soon as Jesus sets foot on that Gentile shore, the people recognize him and start flocking to him. They bring their sick, their lame, and blind. They throng to him, they set their loved ones in the market place so they can just touch the fringe of his cloak and be healed. This one whom they asked to leave a few verses before is given rock-star treatment. The lame walk, the blind see, the sick are healed, the demoniacs cleansed.

Mark's audience was facing a pretty strong headwind in those days. Our best reconstruction of Mark's audience suggests that Nero had decided they were a handy scapegoat for the fire which had destroyed much of the city and which Nero quite likely had set. He began a brutal persecution, but also a smear campaign against the Christians. People were suspicious of this little group which met in secret, which espoused strange ideas of a new prophet, a prophet who had died a criminal death in a backwater province noted for its odd religious ideas. They gathered at odd times and ate a meal which rumor may have inflated to be a cannibalistic feast of body and blood. We know that this charge was floating around a few decades later.

It undoubtedly felt like a good time to put your head down and tuck that cross inside your tunic when you walked into the market places. It was a good time to smile blandly when Christ and the followers of the Way came in for criticism and invective. Best not to let them know that you are also a follower of that Way, a Christian as the opponents of Jesus had come to call them.

Mark knows that the great commission still obtains, that Jesus loves all the people of Rome's teeming metropolis and that he had sent that little band of Christians to bear witnesses to that kingdom which even now was coming in every baptism, in every absolution, in every new believer made. And so today he would give them hope, the antidote to fear. It is a message which he has been developing for several chapters now. In chapter 4, The sower, who had sown his seed in the realistic expectation that it probably would not work, also had hope that the seed would find good ground and bear its marvelous fruit. The seed was a little thing, a mustard seed really, it did not look like much but it worked, sometimes beyond all reason. The Jesus who calmed the storms, raised the dead, and cured the sick, this Jesus was at work in this salutary word.

The reading from two weeks ago offers us a sobering reminder. The first Christian witness had suffered a terrible fate at the hands of sinful men, just as our master has suffered. This is not a way to "win" in the eyes of the world, in fact it might result in martyrdom, but that is not the end of the story and we do not need to be put off by that. Jesus lives, every Sunday is a little Easter and a proclamation that Satan, World, and Sin do not have the last word here, that belongs to our beloved Savior and he speaks a word of life, he is the Word of Life.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and most merciful God, the protector of all who trust in You, strengthen our faith and give us courage to believe that in Your love You will rescue us from all adversities; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one god, now and forever.

God has all the power and is merciful, he can do anything, but what he does is for your sake, for your blessing, your good, even though your just desserts would surely be wrath and punishment.

God protects us who trust in Him, but from what? Christians have car crashes at the same rate as the rest of the population. We die at the same rate as everyone else too (100% at last check). Our deaths are not particularly less painful or easier than the deaths suffered by unbelievers. Of course, you might suggest that I am being far too materialistic here. There is a whole Spiritual dimension which has nasty beings who would surely seek our woe and God protects us from them. This may indeed be true, I believe it is. But such a spiritual dimension is hard to get your head around, especially in our empirically scientific age. The fact that my soul has not been devoured by some nasty demon may indeed be the result of God's protection and intervention, or it might be that there is no such entity seeking to devour me. As a believer I will credit the reality of Satan because the Bible says so. The people, to whom I am preaching, however, might not be so willing to credit such an idea. This is the work of the enlightenment upon us. The iron bars which have so constrained the theological imagination in the West are bending and breaking, but in many places, in many hearts, they still hold very fast.

If I assert that God protects me, I should be able to point to some way that he does so, or perhaps I should be a little careful in the assertion. As the next sentence suggests, the protection of God is a matter of faith, not sight. It takes the divine gift of courage to believe that God will in love rescue us from all the nasty things, drying every tear. Right now, because we are on this side of heaven's glory, Christians will shed their share of tears.

This of course brings us back to the issue of faith and how the person who is in that relationship with God has protection, and the courage it takes to face a foe in faith. Remember that faith is a relationship. I remember when I was younger, my daughter was about three years old and we stopped at hotel while on a hot summer vacation. The establishment had a swimming pool. We spent quite a bit of time there; most of this involved her jumping off the pool deck into my arms. She had a blast, but that fun was made possible because she trusted me to catch her. She could not swim, the pool was not a shallow little children's pool. She could have drowned in that much water easily, but she had courage to leap off the side without ever thinking about the danger. She knew her father would catch her and so that freed her to concentrate on other things, like how far she could jump and how much fun she was having.

I don't mean to be pedantic or to demean you and your parishioners as children, but this little episode can really help us understand what is going on in these texts. In the first one God made the promise never to do the flood again. That is not how he will solve problems. In the Gospel reading the disciples encounter Jesus walking on the water and are terrified, believing him to be a ghost. Mark doesn't tell us the story of Peter walking on the water, but simply that Jesus got in the boat and comforted them and the winds cease. The disciples are astounded, says Mark because they did not understand about the loaves, the feeding of five thousand. Then they come to the shores of Gennesaret. The last time Jesus and his disciples got out of a boat, the locals kicked them out, demanding that Jesus leave (Mark 5:18-20). Now Jesus shows up and enjoys some sort of rock star status. Does Mark imply that this is the result of the demoniac's witness?

The disciples, seeing only the waves and the impossibility of a man walking on water were paralyzed with fear. Jesus takes the fear away and emboldens them to a shore which bore a terror of another kind. But just as he has stilled the storm of the night before, he has changed the agitated hearts of the people of that region to a more pacific demeanor through the unlikely testimony of a demoniac.

So we pray that God would strengthen our faith which trusts the promises that he has made to us and that he would give us courage to believe that every nasty thing out there which seeks my suffering and my life, every nasty thing, will be taken care of by the promise making, storm calming, hungry feeding, water walking, heart opening Lord.

Readings

Genesis 9:8-17 I thought the earlier verses might help us get a running start at this pericope. The Adventists, who are big in my neck of the woods, apparently don't read this part.

*And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.
2 The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. 3 Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. 4 But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. 5 And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.*

*6 “Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.*

7 And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.”

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” 12 And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

In the afternoon light, a rainbow appears in sky. The believer sees the rainbow and hears a promise from God. The unbeliever sees tiny water droplets suspended in the atmosphere refracting light to produce a beautiful optical manifestation of light. More likely they both are grinning as they think about leprechauns and an imagined pot of gold. Is it more profitable (or should we say prophetable?) to stress the promise in that rainbow or do we do better to bring them to God through the wonder of creation, the light and the water interplaying? Do we let the transcendence of the moment and the rainbow touch their heart? Or do we let the Word of God speak through Genesis 9? It can work either way, trust the Spirit of God but for heaven’s sake, don’t let these transcendent moments be claimed by one of the many “spiritualities” which are floating around out there!

N. T. Wright begins his little book “Simply Christian” with this illustration. A community has bubbling spring within its boundaries, which many enjoy but which sometimes causes floods and

other problems. Everyone gets their water from it, and sometimes the water isn't the best. The powerful government elects to place a thick concrete cap on the spring, treat the water, and pipe it into the community. It no longer bubbles merrily in the middle of the town and it sometimes tastes funny, but, says the government, it never washes your house away either.

After many years the pressure finally builds up and bursts through the concrete cap in a turgid, muddy, roiling mess of a flood. The taps no longer work, the water engineers are at a loss what to do.

Wright suggests we are living in this sort of a moment right now. In the period of the Enlightenment religion/spirituality was domesticated. It was forced off the public stage and into the private lives of people. Polite company precluded a religious discussion and science was held up as the real solution to our problems. Wright suggests that 9/11 and a number of other factors changed all that. The concrete cap of the enlightenment is cracking and bursting open. The problem is that the water so constrained is muddy and turgid. People who have been denied so long are dipping into anything wet, without regard to what it is. Like a thirsty man who doesn't care about the cleanliness of the water he drinks, many are diving into spiritual waters which are not healthy at all. Rainbows can mean all sorts of things to all sorts of people. The Christians better be out there with their meaning clearly articulated, because someone will articulate it for you, and you won't like what they say.

I find it really interesting that the picture of a rainbow, often with animals and an ark, is painted on most day care walls. Is that the access point when we see a rainbow? This is a promise made to the whole human race, not just preschoolers.

This is a worthy reading just so that every time you see a rainbow you can point it out to the children in the car and talk about God's promises. Honestly, if I was inclined to preach this text, I would preach it to parents and grandparents and others who might be dealing with kids and urge them to use those rainbows to talk about God. It is a great hook.

Of course the homosexual lobby has adopted the rainbow as a symbol, but I would just leave that out of this. I don't think they have cornered that symbol yet, it doesn't have to mean that.

The rainbow can still be a promise made to all of us. God solves problems in a different way. We see the interaction with God transform and change as history progresses. Elijah on Mt Carmel pretty well ends the miraculous ministry of prophets. Elisha will carry on for a few years afterwards, but it seems as if the moment for miracles had passed, at least until Jesus showed up on the scene 800 years later. The post-exilic literature in the Bible in fact spends a great deal of time wrestling with this change, wondering where the new Moses was and when was God going to get around to smiting the Babylonians the same way he smote the Egyptians. Some of those expectations would be transferred to messianic expectations.

This too will become a messianic expectation. When the Messiah comes he will destroy all the evil in the world and restore it. A few years ago I had a most interesting conversation with the

lone Jewish student in my summer NT section. She was at Concordia because we have a nursing program. She is not a theologically trained Jew, but is active. I really like having her in class.

One day she came up to me and asked a great question. She said that when Messiah comes, he will do many things, and while Christians claim that Jesus did some of them, he did not do all of them. How can we claim that he is the messiah? It is a great question and I was delighted that she asked it. I told her that Christians are aware of the issue and our answer is not terribly satisfying, but it is all we have. "Jesus is coming back," I said. "Then he will fulfill all those other expectations of the Messiah." We are waiting too, it seems.

The God who commands the mighty floods does not use them as behavior modification. But to cleanse his creation that he may make it anew, that is possible. He also commands the very fires which burn at the heart of our sun and the forces of nature which hold the very universe together. One could, if one was a lawyer, argue and say that God has not promised that he would never send fire or some other calamity upon the earth, He is only taking flooding off the table, but I think that is missing the point of this. God is not going to do this again, at least not until the very end when the sky rolls up like a scroll and this world's judge appears with heavenly hosts.

What we see unfolding in the chapters of Genesis which follow is that God pulls Abram out of the people of the East, leads him to Canaan and makes a covenant with him that through him God will bless all the families of the earth. That is the way God will deal with this broken and sinful planet.

When you see a rainbow in the sky next time, don't just drive by it. Remember the promise that God has made. He isn't going to destroy as he ought to do. He has chosen another way, a cruciform path which involved his suffering for the sins of the world, not his destroying it for the rebellious creation it has become.

Psalm 136:1-9

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

² Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

⁴ to him who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

⁵ to him who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

⁶ to him who spread out the earth above the waters,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

⁷ to him who made the great lights,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁸ the sun to rule over the day,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁹ the moon and stars to rule over the night,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁰ to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹¹ and brought Israel out from among them,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹² with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹³ to him who divided the Red Sea in two,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;

The psalm takes a bit of a turn in verse 10 so we only get the first nine verses. Is this just another way of putting a cap on our religion in the image of N. T. Wright above? Are we so afraid of being seen as believing in a dangerous God that we have domesticated him? Are we afraid of this God? Do practice another form of Marcionism?

The psalmist returns to the same, relentless refrain after each statement about God: His steadfast love (hesed) endures forever. That might have been harder to see if you were an Egyptian mother cradling a dead child, but it was also no less true. Creation shows us God but it is the narrative which informs the heart to say that this God loves us. He did slay the Egyptian firstborn and led his people out of Egypt to settle them in a land he had promised to their fathers.

The psalm offers an interesting preaching opportunity, if you were to go with the rainbow element above. We can, because the Scriptures have revealed it to us, look at every rainbow and every double helix of DNA, and the fossilized bones of dinosaurs and the images of Pluto that have beamed back to us this week and say that the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. That is a gift from God.

Ephesians 3:14-21 Again, a little context is necessary here. These are the verses which fall between last week's pericope and the present week's readings.

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

⁶ *This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

⁷ *Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.* ⁸ *To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,* ⁹ *and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,* ¹⁰ *so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.* ¹¹ *This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,* ¹² *in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.* ¹³ *So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.*

¹⁴ *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,* ¹⁵ *from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,* ¹⁶ *that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,* ¹⁷ *so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,* ¹⁸ *may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,* ¹⁹ *and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

²⁰ *Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,* ²¹ *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

This concluding paragraph would make a great summary for all the sermons we preach, not only in the notes and sermon ideas below, but every Sunday. Jesus redirects, Jesus calms the winds, Jesus has taken up residence in our hearts and changed the world. To him belongs all that glory!

Paul seems to be summarizing his whole ministry and the Gospel itself. This letter was a circular letter which he wrote to many congregations. The name “Ephesus” only appears in later manuscripts. He probably wrote it toward the end of his career, most likely at the same time he was composing the letter to the Colossians, because we notice a lot of verbal similarities in there. (They both use the armor of God imagery, for instance, but change it enough that we don’t think one of them is a copy, but both are creative uses of the same picture.)

Notice the temple imagery which Paul is using in the first paragraph here. He is building on the same sort of image which ended the reading last week at the end of chapter 2. Paul is praying that the hearer, the reader, be able to comprehend the deep, broad, high, long love of God. In fact, one gets the impression that God’s love is so huge that it will burst the temple. Paul wants us to be full of the fullness of God. This will require integrity and strength. The pressure on this temple is all internal, not external. It is not the wind and the rain, the elements which will batter down this temple, the pressure is all inside, it is the amazing love of God that fills it, which must

get out. Is this what Paul means when he says we are cracked vessels which contain a treasure in II Corinthians 4 and 5? Are we cracked because the enormity of God is within us?

Notice here the echo of the promise God made to Abraham, that he would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. This is the repeated and important argument of both Romans and Galatians. Here Paul is noticing that all the families of the earth draw their name from God. God is the God of everyone, Paul seems to be saying. I don't subscribe to the idea which some put forward that Paul here advocates that all religions are just other paths to God. Paul also will say that Christ is propitiation for sin. He doesn't suggest that there are alternate routes other than Jesus. But he does assert here that God's fatherly care and love is for the whole of humanity, including this corner of humanity where you are given to preach. The way he does this is that the word in Greek for "family" is a form of the Greek word for "Father." So he prays to the Father who is the archetype from whom all fathers draw their name. The ancients could not conceive of a family without a father. Indeed a widow was absorbed into the family of another male relative, usually a son, but perhaps someone else.

One of the reasons we suggest that this may be Paul's summary of his ministry is the style of the letter itself. This is much more stylistically sophisticated than most of Paul's letters and this paragraph is no exception. This seems like a document that he really worked on and which he intended to be read by a very wide audience. This is so much so that of course some scholars doubt that Paul could have written it and have declared it to be a falsely attributed letter of Paul. That view is increasingly coming under some tough scrutiny and recent scholarship has at least concluded that Paul could have written it and there is a strong tradition that says that he did in fact write it. For us, however, this is tough Greek and the English translation we are using does not necessarily do us any favors.

The end of the first paragraph is thick. In fact, the whole paragraph is really one sentence which makes use of purpose clauses upon purpose clauses to indicate the content of Paul's prayers. Here is a logical break down which might help.

Paul first prays that they may be strengthened in their inner being through the power of the Spirit.

This translation then uses a result clause – "so that" - to suggest that the strength results in the indwelling of Christ in the hearts of the hearers through faith. This is not the only way to read this. One could simply read these two clauses in parallel and I am inclined to do so. First he prays that the Spirit empower us internally and then that Christ dwell in our hearts. I tend to see them as a package deal.

The next part does seem to be more of a purpose or result sort of construction. He switches to the nominative second person "You" and describes you as being rooted and grounded in love. But again they speak in terms of a purpose clause and I would rather see this as a result clause. It

seems to me that the grammar is capable of either reading. (But I have to admit that these guys who serve on these translation committees are much better grammarians than I am!)

So, the Spirit and Jesus are inside us, notice again the temple idea. This is God taking up residence in us. Rooting and grounding us in love with the result that we are able to comprehend the length, breadth, height, and depth of God's love which otherwise surpasses knowledge.

And, in a parallel clause, with the result that we are filled with the fullness of God.

That is pretty thick stuff – here's Phil's trashlation/paraphrase

I am always praying to the God who is the father of all humanity that he would give you out of the riches of his glory with the result that the Spirit dwells inside you with power and with the result that Jesus lives in your hearts.

Being rooted and grounded in Spirit/Jesus love, will result in you being able to comprehend how wide, tall, deep, and high is the love of God which otherwise surpasses any human ability to know it and it will result in you being filled with the very fullness of God.

That is not nearly so pretty as Paul did it, but it might help the understanding a little.

Just in case you think you understood this, did you notice that the love of God has four dimensions? That should give your brain a bit of a cramp.

This is frightening in a sense. Paul is describing people of faith, us, as being the very repository of God. He is here, is active. He is working in and through us. Suddenly our words are no longer just words which we speak but they are laden with the very love and power of God. He is bursting out of us.

Paul ends the little prayer with a doxology. Notice what he says about God here. He does more than we know how to ask. I am not even sure that I understand what Paul asked, and now God is going to do more? But he says that the power is at work in us already. This is the Spirit and Jesus who both dwell inside the believer and the Church. God is glorified in that church and in that age and this generation and all generations.

Mark 6:45-56

⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, ⁵⁰ for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take

heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”⁵¹ And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded,⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. ⁵⁴ And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him ⁵⁵ and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

At first this seems like two unrelated accounts. But their juxtaposition in Mark is surely intentional.

The first story, the story of Jesus walking on the water: Mark does not tell the story of Peter getting out of the boat, but clearly this is the same episode which Matthew relates in chapter 14 of his Gospel. The disciples are rowing and having a tough time of it. There is no storm, per se, but the wind is against them and they are obeying Jesus’ mandate to go to the other side. It says that Jesus made them get into the boat. The word used in this instance connotes force or compulsion. Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray, but while his eyes were directed upward, they were also looking outward. He saw that they were only making progress “painfully”. This was a tough pull against a wind. In about the fourth watch, late in the night, after they had been working hard for quite awhile, long after you and I would have been debilitated by aching muscles and blistered hands, Jesus walks by. Mark makes a point of saying that Jesus intended to walk right on by. But the disciples shrieked. Was it Andrew who screamed, perhaps James the Less or Simon the Zealot. I always like to think that one of those guys got a line in here or there. Jesus responds to their fear and climbs in the boat and joins them for the ride. He says “don’t be afraid, it’s me.” The wind ceases at that point and the disciples are astounded.

Here is an out take from Pr. Jim Markus’ sermon from some years ago. He sent it to me and was looking for some feedback from the brethren.

It would seem that Jesus wanted to be seen by the disciples as he passed by. The word for “pass by” could be a technical word for a theophany of God. A theophany of God is a revelation of God. In the OT we remember how the Lord put Moses in a cleft of a rock in order to pass by to show his glory. And Elijah was to stand on a mountain because the Lord was about to pass by (I K 19:11). To pass by was a way God gave someone a glimpse of his glory. It is very likely then that Jesus wanted the disciples to see him so that he could reveal his glory.

I would simply add to this the words of Amos from a week ago in which God threatened not to pass by the shrines of Israel, thus rendering them desolate and empty.

Does this mean that Jesus' attempt at theophany was a failure? After all, when they see him "passing by" they don't immediately start worshipping God, they just scream in terror. It seems Jesus must then clamber over the side of the boat and calm them down. The theophany needs to be brought into the boat in mercy and love. Or is that the theophany?

Mark again is careful to point out that their astonishment is due to the fact that they did not understand about the loaves – the feeding of the five thousand. Mark even goes so far as to assert that their hearts were "hardened." That phrase has a long and dark history in the Bible. Pharaoh's heart was hardened so that the children of Israel could see God disassemble the Egyptian Pantheon one plague at a time. Were the disciples' hearts hardened so we could see the miracles which Jesus performed through these words? Were they hardened for another purpose? Were they just hard hearted?

What don't they get? Is it just that Jesus can do some crazy stuff because he is God after all? Walking on water has become a cliché in common parlance for doing the impossible. I "don't walk on water" is a way of expressing my human limitations, but Jesus apparently did not have all those limitations. Or do they not get another thing? Is the hardness of heart really more a critique of their fear? Here they are slogging away at a difficult task Jesus has compelled them to undertake. Suddenly they are afraid, you can bet they did precious little rowing at that point. The wind started to push them back to the other side of the lake, perhaps out into the middle. Jesus, who has other ways of doing this, suddenly, immediately climbs in and calms their fears. The winds cease and they resume their journey. Notice it does not say that Jesus created a 70 horse Johnson outboard motor which propelled them across the lake. Having rowed hard, they bent their backs to the oars once more, but this time with better results. And it is true, I know, that John tells us in his version of this story in chapter 6 of his Gospel account that suddenly they were at the other side. If that was so, why doesn't Mark tell us that? Does he deliberately leave that detail out for a reason?

Is that a little like us, tasked with a tough job, being a preacher in this place, being a Christian in this place. Do fears distract us from the task laid before us? Do we really think that Jesus will take away all the need for our effort? Have we seen Jesus passing by outside the confines of our little congregational vessel, working through someone who is not Lutheran, and screamed in terror?

Mark brings us then to the real crux of the matter. The winds which blow against us are probably not the type that made the disciples labor so mightily that long night. For us the winds which blow are much more like the pressure that drove Jesus out of the Gadarenes in the beginning of chapter 5. After he cast out the legion of demons, the locals united behind a singular request of Jesus: Go away! They had seen the pigs bobbing in the water, they had seen the young man sitting at Jesus feet, in his right mind, actually wearing clothes, cleansed of his demonic possession, and they all had the same fearful reaction: "Go away!" The winds were blowing off shore that day, and they pushed Jesus away from that dismal coast and the floating

corpses of their pigs. The young man had wanted to go with Jesus, a new start with the man who had freed him of his demonic shackles probably looked appealing. But Jesus denies his request; instead, he makes him an emissary to the very people who had been so afraid the demoniac and now were afraid of what Jesus had done to him. He sends him home, to the people he knows.

He must have done his work. Genessaret and Gedarenes are not exactly the same place. One is on the southern end of Galilee and the other more northern; but I think Mark is laying these two disembarking moments side by side. This time, when Jesus steps out of the boat, he is not greeted by a demoniac and a popular wind which pushed him back out to sea. He is accorded what can only be described as hero status. The people flock to him, bringing their sick, and their lame and blind loved ones. Jesus apparently stays a while, takes a tour of the area for they lay them out in the market places as Jesus passes through towns, just so they may touch the edge of his cloak. And they are healed. What a contrast with what happened just a few verses before in his own home town where Mark says that their lack of faith prevented Jesus from doing much.

What change has come over them, and what was the agent of this change? Surely that second question can only be answered with the demoniac who told the story of what Jesus had done to him. He is the only one Mark knows or has told us about who has been active on Jesus behalf on the other side. Jesus has used the most unlikely candidate to change a whole region. While we would have grabbed the people of power to accomplish this task, Jesus took the guy who pushes a grocery cart filled with garbage, talks to himself and lives under a bridge to change the world. In Mark 4 terms, this is a mustard seed moment, a moment when the seed grows automatically, a reaping of good soil which bore fruit thirty, sixty, even one hundred times what was sown. (Actually, wheat bears about eight times what is sown, but that is the miracle here, the kingdom of heaven is like seed sown, but in this it exceeds it.)

The change that came over the people of Genesseret was surely the transformation of faith.

Is it not so that today we often feel a stiff breeze blowing us out to sea as well, a breeze which says that our Christian witness is not really welcome, a holdover from a pre-enlightened past, a narrow mindedness and a thing which they really don't want to hear. How often are we categorized as backward, stupid, uncaring, hypocritical, and judgmental? Faith is a matter of private life, something to be practiced in the home, if at all, but not in the public sphere, not at work, not at civic events, not in front of people who are not already Christians.

Jesus and Mark today offer us a measure of hope. The breeze was blowing stiffly that day when Jesus got back in the boat and he sent a frightened young man with a new suit and a checkered past into the region of the Gedarenes. He had a story to tell of Jesus love for him, and it worked. Jesus can calm storms and make what looks like fruitless labors, rowing which gets us nowhere, into a fruitful ministry.

Law

1. We face a stiff headwind when we seek to fulfill the great commission. The culture in which we live does not want us to do that. We are gauche and uncouth if we attribute our blessings to God instead of “luck.” Bring up Jesus and just watch people look away uncomfortably. They really don’t want him in the room. He makes them uncomfortable.
2. Social and societal pressures are real and powerful, perhaps more potent than the more overt persecution that the first reader’s of Mark’s Gospel felt. Of course, that is easy for me to say, I don’t have armed soldiers breaking down my door either. But the fear of rejection is a powerful way to keep people silent.
3. My heart has been hardened, was it God or was this self-inflicted? I don’t know, but the reality is that I don’t “get it” that God is active in this world around me. Am I really qualified to be a Christian, let alone a preacher? Am I really a Jesus person?
4. My fears run deep, if I don’t hold them in check, I might panic, I may just lose it.
5. The fruits of this are not hard to see. Christianity is not generally thriving in the US. There are bright spots, occasional congregations which are engaged in thriving outreach and ministry. But for the most part Christian churches in the US are too gray, too small and growing smaller, and they are not keeping up with the general population growth.
6. We really must take some of the blame here. The image of Christians in the larger community is not good. Too often we are not known as people who love each other as Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan many years ago. Today we are known as judgmental, hypocritical, contentious, and self-seeking. We have our hand out for money but too many churches could simply disappear and the communities in which they live would never know the difference.

Gospel

1. Jesus gets in the boat with us. The one who calms the storms and holds back the waters of the great flood is in the boat with us. If we really think about that it might terrify us and what he does do may not always make us comfortable. But he is in the boat with us. He has put his infinite power and overwhelming love into the mission of the Church. He sets us to difficult tasks, but he is watching, and when we are overwhelmed with our fears, he changes his plans and climbs over the side of the boat to sit beside us.
2. Jesus knows the potency of those social pressures and he works to overcome them. When the enemy seems strongest, he often snatches a victory from the very jaws of defeat. The Communists of East Germany were undone when Lutheran preachers held candlelight vigil services, the only place the Stasi allowed people to gather in any numbers. Today the very social structures and technology which threaten to undo the Christian congregations also make people quite lonely. Will Christianity see a rebirth in this country as the one place where you can find a friend? I don’t know, but that really sounds like something Jesus might just do.

3. Jesus alters his intention – Mark tells us he was intending to walk by the struggling disciples, but their fear drew him like a magnet. He came and set their hearts at some rest.
4. Jesus does not just steam on by the disciples for their fearful foolishness or their hardness of heart. He gives them loaves to distribute and he gets in the boat with them and leads them to a place where people are hurting and he is healing. Their failure is not the real question here, the real question is his ministry.
5. Christ did not found denominations or even individual congregations; he founded a movement of people who were in a relationship which the Bible calls faith. It may be painful to see a cherished institution not thriving, but the Church, institution and movement, is all in his hands. This is not our job and if we take it, we only create ulcers for ourselves. Yes, grieve when something good is lost, but also take heart, Jesus has not tied himself to our institutions, and still is doing his great and health-giving work.
6. The transformation of the gentiles of Genesseret is not only an historical factotum, but it is also a living and real possibility for us. Jesus does indeed care for us and he has died for all the failures of our lives and our congregations. The Jesus who stilled the strong wind which blew against the disciples that night would also still the wind of their own fears and transform Peter into a great preacher of forgiveness in Acts. He transformed Saul into Paul, and he transformed my barbarous ancestors from tree worshiping Saxon cannibals to the Christian culture which built cathedrals and founded universities. He continues that transformative work today.

Sermon Ideas

1. In the Hands of Christ (Gospel - That the hearer would delight that his/her whole life has been purchased, won, and now is owned by Christ. He sets the task, but he also takes the responsibility for the success of the endeavor, often working in strange and unforeseen ways to bring about His kingdom in unlikely places.)

Jesus seems to set the disciples on a quixotic task (I have been longing to use that word for a while, so please indulge me.) After feeding the five thousand, he sends them back across the lake to Bethsaida, but the wind is against them. They row all night, and don't seem to get anywhere. But Jesus has his eyes on them, he sees them, and from his vantage point of prayer and service, he sets out miraculously across the water so that he might reveal himself and greet them upon their arrival. But their fear bests them when they look up from their toil and see him on his strange aquatic stroll. He alters his course and calms their fear. He gets in the boat and then, oddly, the whole direction of the mission changes. They don't end up Bethsaida, but in Genesseret, where lately Jesus has been invited to leave. But to their amazement, and Mark takes pains to point out that they really ought not be amazed at what Jesus does, they find that Jesus is welcomed

We might feel like we are rowing against a strong wind here at our parish. Our culture does not welcome the good news about Jesus, but our enemy has poisoned the minds of many and turned their hearts against us. Sometimes that is our own fault for the failure of our witness. Sometimes it is just antipathy, but whatever the cause, being a proclaimer of God's good news today is not a naturally easy task. Jesus has seen your fear and how hard you work and how little progress you make. He has climbed into the boat with us, but notice what happens. The whole mission of the trip changed. They do not end up going home to Bethsaida, but to alien country, on the other side, where the swineherds live and good Jewish boys are not supposed to be. Oddly enough, Jesus finds a welcome there that he does not see in Bethsaida and Capernaum. Remember what happened in his home town a few weeks ago?

Jesus has purchased and won you from Sin, Death, and Devil when he died on the cross. The Supper of which we partake and the Baptism with which we are baptized are each our physical incorporation into that kingdom. The absolution we proclaim is nothing less than the kingdom of God breaking into our lives. But it is God's kingdom. He sets the task, he may change the goal, but we also have hope in that he is working sometimes strangely to bring about unlikely fruit. He had sent a demoniac to spread the good news of Jesus so that his welcome was prepared. This means we have to let go of the ownership, but that is a good thing. He also takes responsibility for the success. We might see some strange things if we open our eyes to see him, he walks on water, he changes people, he uses odd folks, even me.

2. In this Boat with Jesus and on Genessaret's Shore (Gospel /Epistle- That the hearer would joyfully engage in the mission of this congregation and the Kingdom of God encouraged by the presence and the promise of Christ who toils within and through them.)

Jesus today takes his little band of disciples on an odd trip. First he scares them half to death, and then he shows them an amazing thing he has done. We remember the story of the demoniac in Mark 5:1-20. Jesus had sent the young man to tell his story, he did and people were amazed. They were in fact, really amazed. When Jesus shows up he has rock star status. The fearful disciples see two eye popping things in today's gospel reading. Jesus walks on water, and the previously suspicious gentile multitudes are transformed into adoring masses. Which is the larger miracle? Walking on water or more than 130 million Chinese Christians up from nearly zero a century ago?

Jesus has made his way into this boat we call our church. The Nave is the name for the big room where we worship, it is the old Latin word for boat. If you look up, you can probably imagine that it is an upside down boat hull. (Unless you have a church in the round, then it is a little tougher.) He is here today, climbing over the side to show up in Word and Sacrament. His presence is not something that will register to these eyes of

ours except we see with faith as well, but that does not mean he is not here doing some amazing things. The preacher should probably have a story of a transformation of a person ready here, a moment Christ has worked potently in the midst of this congregation, a life transformed, or a moment when a ministry really touched someone. This sermon will depend on being able to point to Jesus today.

The challenge for the believer is that this is not my own doing, but Jesus. The hope for the believer is that this is not my own doing, but Jesus. Funny how it is Law and Gospel there, same phrase, same words which challenge and transform us. Jesus in charge challenges my old sinner, but it is sweet gospel to the new man whom Jesus raised from baptismal death.

3. Don't just do something, Stand There! (Epistle/Gospel - That the hearer would be moved by the Spirit of God to let go of this mission and let God run with it.)

This sermon would be appropriate for a parish that is fighting about mission.

We have rowed hard and we have blisters on our hands and it hurts. We are rowing painfully and making little progress. But we have a God whose love transcends our ability to understand and to comprehend. It is bigger, deeper, wider, and larger than any problem we can face. Paul prays that the Ephesians can get the gift which God gives, Spirit and Jesus, and that blows our mind to see this world differently. Our human nature wants to own the ministry and to set the direction and to tell God what he should be doing and blessing.

Jesus gets in the boat with the disciples and they end up in an unlikely place, among the gentiles who sent them packing last time they were there. Jesus has his hand on the tiller, it might not always bring us to the place which we have in mind. The disciples were rowing to the very place to which Jesus had sent them, but now they go a different place.

The Shepherd needs to tell them that some things never change. In the midst of change, the fear of losing everything often blinds the person facing the change so that they cannot see the possibility. The love of God will never leave them, the forgiveness of their sins, the presence of Christ, the love which has always been shown them. That will not change. The building can change, the ministry can redirect, the people around us might look different, but those things won't change. Our potlucks might have a lot more tacos or rice than we are used to, maybe they will even be vegan, but God will open his hands our needs will be met and we will be blessed. Just think, vegans don't eat jello!

4. The Rainbow (OT and Gospel – To give the hearer hope that God's love for all humanity means he is in the boat with us.)

This sermon would be for a congregation facing great discouragement. The OT lesson speaks of God's love for the whole of humanity. It gives us a promise that God does not take the power option, but the loving path. He will call Abram and through Abram give

us Jesus. He won't send the flood to destroy, but he has flooded us with his love and grace.

Jesus got in the boat with the struggling and terrified disciples. The winds ceased and he led them to a land where wonders and miracles happened, even to the gentiles. It was not what they were expecting, but it was much better. Bethsaida was filled with enemies of Christ. I wonder if they were discouraged to row back in that direction. Does Jesus bring them to this Genneseret because they need to the joy of seeing this happen?

Some of us were looking for a way to preach the rainbow. Does the rainbow connect to the cross? Jesus got into this world in a really important way; he is in the boat with us. I Peter tells us that through the flood God saved Noah. We usually imagine that the flood was God destroying the evil people, but Peter saw it as God saving Noah. The rainbow reminds us of God's love for all, the cross reminds us of the love of God for us.

We all need a rainbow. God gives them. The preacher of this sermon might also look at the Psalm today with its persistent refrain of God's steadfast love enduring. Many of your parishioners may pray a prayer at meal times which also prays this refrain of God's enduring steadfast love. If they don't you should probably encourage them to do so. This is a very good thing to remember every day, not just the days with rainbows.