

## "In the Dark of the Night"

Psalm 133:1-3; Matthew 14:25-31

Let me begin by noting that there is no small truth to the claim that "the effectiveness of the church in bringing the kingdom of God more fully into its intended being and earthly incarnation depends to a significant degree on how willing we are to step out of the boat." [repeat]

Some time back an astute observer and theologian wrote, perhaps to our surprise, "The work of Christ is limited by our unbelief. There is doubtless much that God would prefer to do for us and our society, but He limits His action to function where and when its results are recognized to be of God and not by our own achievements." One key point of this is that there is a direct correlation to the will of God, and the work of God, as it intersects with the faith and actions, or inactions, of the people of God. This is clearly seen in the story of Peter and his famous walking on water incident. Jesus could not have been taken by surprise by Peter's sudden descent into the turbulent and dark waters. Jesus knew very well what was coming. But it is equally and precisely true that Jesus was ready and prepared to lend the necessary helping hand.

Today's sermon of course is drafted from essentially the same Gospel text we used last week. However, our emphasis and application are very different, following the more typical "just step out of the boat and trust in Jesus."

You may remember that last week I mentioned that our Session will hold our regular monthly Session meeting following worship today. It has been postponed until next Sunday. I believe I asked us all to begin to be in prayer for them.

It has occurred to me that our elected Elders, Tom, Chris, Lance, and Matt are facing at least a couple of the most thorny dilemmas and issues our Ruling Elders have faced in a long time. The only exceptions would of course be the dilemma they faced in figuring out this past spring how to be faithful to God's call for us to be regularly in worship and how to not let adult Sunday School and worship grind to a sputtering halt. Each step of the way the future appeared dark and foreboding, with no pathway clear and certain. Everything we talked about and considered at each special Session meeting was to some degree unnerving. The apprehension on our faces were clearly there to be seen as we gathered and prayed our opening prayers. And yet, and yet, we moved ahead with zoom for Sunday School and Facebook Live for worship. We then later moved on to parking lot worship and in-house worship.

But we are once again facing the dark of the night, so to speak. This applies to some degree with Sunday School and worship, but to a more significant degree in terms of Youth Group. We also will consider this concept a little later in my message in terms of our local school district. They, too, to my estimation, are looking into the dark of the night, into the uncertainty and dangers of our perilous present day reality. Whether in terms of the church or our school we are to some significant degree and in a certain sense unnerved when we take stock of the particulars of our circumstances. For Peter, it was the whipping wind and the spray from the pulsing and pounding waters that sought to overpower

him, suck him under, and drown him. Indeed, in the dark of that night, amid the tumult that sought his life, there was no visible path forward.

And yet, with the hand and touch of Jesus, God pulled success from the jaws of seeming defeat. It is with this ultimate lesson from God's holy Scriptures that we find hope, inspiration, and courage for us today. Let us not forget a 2-sided lesson we learned last week. Yes, Peter was something of a failure when he took his eyes off Jesus. But on the other hand, he was nonetheless a success in that he stepped forward and attempted to do the impossible. It may not have been Jesus' idea for him to make the specific attempt, but Jesus honored him by saying, "Come," whereupon he was ready to catch him. Should we not commend our Elders for stepping out of the boat into the dark of the night even if they should not do everything perfectly? Isn't it more respectable, proper, and Biblical to at least make the attempt than to sit back and do nothing? And this is why I am going to ask that we all begin to be more heavily invested in prayer for our Elders and Alicia our youth director. I will address this in at least several ways before we're done today.

John Ortberg, of whom some of you are aware, wrote that "Peter knew that when he sank, Jesus would be there, and he was wholly adequate to save. The other disciples could not know because they never got out of the boat. This is the fundamental truth; If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat. If you want to experience the power of God in your life, you've got to take a step of faith. It involves risky obedience." [this and the former quote taken from *Matthew, the NIV Application Commentary*, Wilkins, 522, 526]

It is important to note that at root of the problem was the disciples' fear of the unknown. Let's think about it for a moment. How many of us have ever seen someone walking on water, literally, in the daylight even, let alone at night? It's something that just isn't done. It was no less for them than it is for us. [I could share the joke involving the 2 pastors and a priest and some stepping stones in a lake, but that would be a distraction.] Let us remember that this event occurred during the 4th watch of the night, that is, probably between 3 and 6 in the morning. The text doesn't mention it but quite often the human experience is such that those late night, early morning hours are the very hours that the human psyche is more prone or susceptible to fears and other negative human experiences. It also is part of what goes along with the lack of necessary sleep, etc. One can only wonder if the disciples were so exhausted and worn out from the many hours of arduous rowing against a formidable wind and pummeling waves that they, upon seeing this human figure coming toward them, began to wonder if they, using our term, were beginning to hallucinate. A human like figure coming to them out in the lake in the midst of a raging storm? To their minds, how could it be anything but a ghost?

I would guess that fewer and fewer 21st century folks believe that "ghosts", as historically understood to be, actually exist.

The Greek word for "ghost" is *fantasma* (fan tas ma) which means a phantom, a specter, that is, something that appears as something of which one is at least somewhat familiar, though not completely. The Greek verb associated with *fantasma* means "to make manifest or visible" but in terms of something

extraordinary or supernatural. To their mind, this thing they saw was of supernatural origin and of supernatural existence. And of course they were scared to death as we would say. And this is, according to one scholar, because the concept of *fantasma* and the rest of that word group is almost always associated with the concept, and reality, of fear.

It is perhaps worth noting that while some dismiss the idea of "ghosts" as belonging to an ancient and unenlightened time and mind set, it is not all that important whether we believe in ghosts or not. The critical point at this point is that what they perceived to stand before them had them virtually paralyzed with fear. That is why this story is so applicable to us today. It was the fear of the unknown. It was the fear of the impossible. It was the fear that some sinister thing was bearing down on them. It was fear that came upon them because of circumstances they had never experienced before. It was fear induced by circumstances of which they could never have imagined.

To be honest, I have been increasingly concerned over what will become of the church of Jesus Christ because of this seemingly never-ending choke hold that has been placed on the church of Jesus Christ. I see this in terms of 2 things. First, our state's governor, and by virtue of the power he wields (rightfully or not) and that of those who serve under him, have placed an enormous strangle hold and restraint on the churches and on their pastors and leadership. Threats of civil and criminal liability and sanctions have not gone unnoticed or unheeded. Some have predicted a virtual end to the church of Jesus Christ as we know it. Many have pointed to radical changes that have already come to be, changes of which are so significant and substantive that the church will never again be the same, regardless of whether covid-19 soon goes away. I know, personally, of one church that for a month or so has been again gathering together under one roof for worship, and with face coverings as an option. Virtually everyone attends with no face covering. But worship attendance has not returned to former levels. There is evidence that some members have gotten kind of used to watching from home. Some are coming to the conclusion that they can watch it later on Sundays at their convenience. Some are sensing that perhaps gathering together as in former days is not all that necessary. In short, the fear of some pastors and leaders is that the church gathering, for worship and fellowship, not only will, but actually is, seeming to be less important than before. In short, some pastors, elders, and other church leaders wonder about the destruction of the church as God intended it to be from the beginning. How do you change and even reverse the seeming trajectory we have been carried along for these past months? One of my most respected seminary professors told us from time to time that, in terms of Acts, chapter 2, which describes the key features of the early Biblical church, he is convinced that the success and very survival of the church was due not only to the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the sermon and the prayers, but also to the fellowship. He is convinced that if it weren't for the person to person fellowship that went along with the other 3 critical components, the church would have died and faded into history.

On the one hand it seems it's been quite a while since the first of the restrictions and lock downs of late March. But on the other hand, in the fuller scope of time, we are only a little more than 4 months since the first lock downs. In the broader scope of time, that's not really all that long. It is fearful to some to see how much the church has been forced to change its ways in such a relatively short period of time. What will come to pass if this covid thing drags on for another year? [Thursday I saw one prediction that this could drag on for another 3 years.] On the one hand we have Jesus' promise that the church, in its deepest essence and reality, will never cease to exist. But on the other hand the Bible talks occasionally in terms of the "remnant", meaning that not everyone will remain faithful but only a few. The implication is that while a remnant will always exist, this doesn't mean individual churches can't or won't radically dwindle, diminish, or even cease to exist! It is a very uncertain future that we face, a reality of which we never saw coming or could have forecast. We certainly didn't ask for it. What we face is a modern day equivalent of what the disciples saw in the dark of the night, unknown, fearful, and foreboding.

And yet, Jesus, knowing their paralyzing fear, calls out in reassurance, "Take courage! It is I! I am here! Don't be afraid." Jesus is here with us in our time and circumstances of almost paralyzing fear in this metaphorically dark, depressing, and distressing time.

You may remember that last week I made kind of a big deal about Peter's request to Jesus. It was not Jesus' idea for Peter to walk on the water. It was Peter's. Our Elders, and Alicia in terms of Youth Group, have already begun to ask Jesus to help us in terms of how to go forward this fall and coming year in terms of worship, Sunday School, and Youth Group. Our leadership knows in general terms what it historically has been called to do and what it has done. But with our changed reality, as it presently stands and in terms of what may portend for the future, what does faithfulness to the Gospel look like, and that in terms of what's good for the kingdom of God and our faith community?

Yes, we learned last week that Peter was both a failure and a success. Yes, he failed when he took his eyes off Jesus, but on the other hand, at least he stepped out in faith, an insufficient faith to be sure, but a true faith nonetheless. Stepping out of the boat in faith and failing in part is far better than playing it safe and not stepping out in faith at all.

One implication and application of this is that if and when our church's leadership make a misstep we would be well advised to be patient and forgiving, not critical. If they decide something of which we disagree, we need to be careful about how we handle that. For their part, I suggest that if they come upon the realization they have made a mistake, they, too, should not be too hard on themselves. We are walking in uncharted waters. Patience and grace is to be served and observed all around. Please note that Jesus did NOT strenuously or critically chastise Peter but only offered what scholars see as a mild rebuke. "You of little faith" in this context was a tepid and mild reminder for Peter to recommit his faith and trust in Jesus.

The circumstances in which we find ourselves is something of a ghost to us. A ghost, as popularly defined and understood to be, is something of an

amorphous or body-less apparition, something that we clearly see but which has a very indefinable nature and vacuous substance. We can see through it as if it is of little or no concrete substance but yet it is clearly there, frightening, and even dangerous.

Alicia and Lance have had some preliminary discussions on Youth Group for this fall. They, our Session, and I will have quite a variety of difficult issues to sort through. Complicating matters to no small degree is that a number of the youth that come here are not members of families who worship or live here. I can't begin to go into the many details and thorny issues Session will have to consider in making their plans for this fall and the coming year.

Succinctly put, it is only slightly less complicated in terms of Sunday School and future worship.

My most important purpose for this sermon, aside from trying to bring Scripture to greater light and present application, is to reinforce the necessity of our congregation coming together in a concerted effort of prayer, more intensely and more specifically than we typically are asked.

I am asking that, for at least the rest of this month, each of us would pray daily for each of our Elders and Alicia, **by name**, in terms of their calling as leaders of our church and in their private lives. Pray passionately (whatever that is to you) for God's Holy Spirit to richly bless them in their professional and personal lives. Pray for God's Spirit to speak to and through them in all aspects of their lives. Pray passionately for God's guidance to be upon them as they sort through the thorny and interrelated issues they will be struggling with. Pray specifically for Jesus himself to take them by the hand and hold them up. You might even in your mind's eye, when you pray, envision Jesus taking Peter by the hand as he began to sink and ask that he do the same for each person of our congregation's leadership. And ask that the Holy Spirit, the 3rd person of the Trinity, to bring it to full power. Our Session, youth leader, and I should never be expected, or allowed, to lead without your prayerful assistance. It is easy for a church to get in the mode of thinking, "The Session, our youth leader, and pastor, they will sort things out." But if this is as far as our thinking goes, we are not doing our part. The church is described in Scripture as **A** "body", not a bunch of bodies, but a single body, a living breathing organism made up of a number of different parts, but all and each of which is of the same body.

Our church's leadership are now at the brink of having to step out of the boat in the dark of the night in what seem like very turbulent waters. But if I may speak for Lance, Matt, Chris, Tom, Alicia, and myself the first and foremost thing we want to do is keep our eyes on Jesus lest we sink in the wind and waves of the present storm. WWJD has devolved to become something now of a quaint, sentimental acronym characterized with idyllic expectations but with little substance in terms of subsequent action. But, I believe this is a time in the church's history for us to resurrect WWJD and infuse it anew with meaning and purpose.

Let me add Bickleton school district and all our school's teacher's, leadership, and staff to this emphasis and application. If I understand correctly, staff is to report tomorrow to begin the coming school year. A week from

tomorrow the many children we love and serve will begin to arrive. This is not simply an addendum to our church focus, as in an afterthought, but as an integral part of the effort I am urging us to willingly and joyfully engage. Please pray fervently for those who serve our community and God's world in context of our school.

Let me offer a special piece of information. As most of you know, our Session and congregational meeting minutes are reviewed annually by a Presbytery committee for that singular and specific purpose. The person who reviewed our Session minutes must have read it very carefully and thoroughly for in the comments section she noted: "The school district is blessed to have a Christian as their superintendent." Isn't it interesting that a Session Minutes reader picked that out of our Session minutes? If we should ever wonder about the value of our witness as Christians, please don't doubt it. The value and implications of our Christian witness is far beyond what we probably can ever know. Let us be seriously prayerful for our school district as we are our church's leadership. Please know that next Sunday we will be adjourning our time in worship to go and pray over our school as we have done in the past, except that, since we will not be allowed in the building, we will be going place to place externally to do the same as before. God's Spirit is less concerned whether we pray inside or outside the physical structure than that we simply do so.

I began my message saying, "the effectiveness of the church in bringing the kingdom of God more fully into its intended being and earthly incarnation depends to a significant degree on how willing we are to step out of the boat." And so it is. Do you agree? Will you step out with us in unified prayerful support and encouragement? Amen.