

“TAKE HEART; IT IS I. DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

What were the disciples thinking? There they were, in their little boat, the wind against them, making little or no progression on the big sea. Maybe, we could better understand their thinking if we look at the context of our lesson, especially what happens just before our lesson begins.

Jesus had sent them out two by two. They came back to Jesus and “told Him all that they had done and taught”. They went away in a boat to a desolate place, but the crowd recognized Jesus and pressed in, upon them. Jesus had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and taught them many things. He fed 5,000 men, plus the women and children, with five loaves and two fish. “Immediately,” -- notice Mark’s interesting choice of words here, “Immediately, He made” them -- ***made*** them -- “get into the boat and go before Him to the other side.” Jesus sends them out on a sunset cruise on the Sea of Galilee. But, the Evangelist records for us that this pleasure cruise is anything but pleasurable. He doesn’t tell us if the storm came on gradually, beginning with a gentle wind and darkness or it came on suddenly, but He does tell us that they were making slow progress, for “the wind was against them.” It was dark; they were cold and miserable, and not getting anywhere.

What were the disciples thinking? Mark doesn’t tell us, but our human nature allows us to fill in the blanks pretty well. When tribulation outweighs hope, we despair. And the disciples are despairing.

They had gotten into their little boat just after supper and it was now the 4th watch of the night, some time between 3-6 AM. They had been in that boat for about 10 hours and, no doubt, they were beginning to ask the

same questions you would ask: Why? Why did Jesus do this to us? Where is Jesus? Why isn't He with us? Why has Jesus abandoned us? They are like sheep without a shepherd, because they don't see Jesus.

Where is Jesus in all of this? It appears on the surface, to our human reason and senses, that Jesus just doesn't care. He "made" them get into that boat. He sent them out into that watery torture chamber by themselves, and look at what Mark tells us -- when He walks out on the water, "He meant to pass by them." Where is the compassion Jesus had on the crowd?

This type of situation is not unfamiliar to you. Those same waters of tribulation have come up to your neck, whether it's death, or debt, your name and reputation defamed by wagging tongues, sudden tragedy, or the daily grind of everyday life. The swift current of doubt has threatened to drown you. You have fallen into the deep waters of despair and the flood of temptation has swept over you. You grow weary from crying out. Your eyes grow dim looking for Jesus, because your reason and your emotions tell you Jesus isn't there. Like the disciples, you begin to doubt Jesus' promises. Your tribulation outweighs your hope, and you despair.

The reality of the situation is this: the Evangelist Mark makes it clear to us that this tribulation is on purpose. Jesus knew what He was doing when He made His disciples get into that boat and sent them out onto that sea. It is not because Jesus hates the disciples; it is not punishment; it is not because the disciples have done something wrong. It was to refine their faith, like a refiner purifies silver or gold; like a good gardener who prunes the branches of his tree.

Our Lutheran Confession say it this way:

God in His purpose has ordained before the time of the world by what crosses and sufferings He would conform every one of His elect to the image of His Son. His cross shall and must work together for good for everyone, because they are called according to God's purpose.

Like Joseph, the devil intends this tribulation for evil, but Jesus intends tribulation for your good.

Before you cry that's not fair, remember the tribulation Jesus went to you for you. Jesus willingly went to the greatest tribulation of all -- His cross and passion. He willingly laid aside the glory of heaven, to take on human flesh and bone and dwell among us in this vale of tears. He willingly went to His passion, even after praying in Gethsemane's garden that His Father take it from Him. He willingly allowed Himself to be nailed to Calvary's cross for you, for your forgiveness, for your salvation.

And He rose again the third day to abide with you. When His disciples were in that tribulation, notice what Jesus is doing, "And after He had taken leave of them, He went up on the mountain to pray." And just at the point of despair, Jesus comes to them, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." He gets into the boat with them and the storm stopped.

Look at our OT lesson. What was Noah thinking? He was troubled. He had survived the flood on the ark, now what? He hears God's Word, "never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And then he sees the sign of God's covenant -- the rainbow in the sky.

Jesus comes to you in your troubles, in the same way. Jesus says, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16). "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Jesus speaks to you, "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven." And He gives you the sign of His covenant: "I baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and

of the Holy Spirit. “Take, eat; this is My body. Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26). Jesus speaks and His Word gives you courage, makes you strong, brave for the facing of this hour.

So, when you find yourself in tribulation, the great accuser will convince you God is punishing you; the world will mock you and laugh at you; your sinful nature will tempt you to believe Jesus has abandoned you, remember how Jesus comes to troubled people. Remember, Jesus is the one who sends you into that tribulation to accomplish much good for you. That tribulation may well be painful, but it is not God torturing you. Rather, pain is the work of a loving gardener pruning you, for your good.

Remember, as your High Priest, Jesus is praying for you, just as He prayed for His disciples. [Christ] is the one...who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us,” the Bible... (Ro 8).

Remember, He has not abandoned you. “I am with you always, to the end of the age,” is His promise to you (Mt 28). And remember that when you suffer, He suffers with you. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (He 4).

As you sail in the ark of His church, He keeps His Word. We need to remember that because as we sail in our little boat of His Church, the wind is against us and it seems our progress is ever so slow. We live in a time when the Supreme Court of our nation has legalized same sex union, shootings, economic uncertainty. It may seem to our reason and senses that we are just adrift in our little boat, on a big sea. It is dark and cold and we are afraid.

But, Jesus is with us, to strengthen us, cheer us, and keep us until we reach that safe harbor of heaven.

Amen.