Sermon from Pastor Sarah Schilcher, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Butte, Mt. August 13, 2023

Dear Friends in Christ, Grace and Peace to you in the name of God, our Creator, and of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

There is a story of an uncle who wanted to humor his little nephew who had a large balloon shaped like a lion. “I’m scared of that big lion of yours,” he announced to the boy. “Don’t be scared,” said the boy. “You ought to see how small he looks when I let out the air.”

Fears. Some are rational. Some get blown out of proportion by the tricks of our minds. But fear has a function. Without it, our ancestors would have been eaten by the saber tooth tigers. Without it, we go and put our hands on hot stoves, never wear sunscreen, and just let our kids run wild on a busy street. Fear can keep us safe. Fear can also do other, less helpful things to our mental and physical health, to our relationships. The question is, what happens when fear meets faith, community, and the one who walks on water?

Both our first lesson and our Gospel lesson today, contain fear. Elijah, a 9th Century Israelite prophet, is cowering in a cave. He crossed a queen not to be crossed, who didn’t like it when he opposed and then destroyed her priests to her god called Baal. Jezebel wanted Elijah’s head. So he is on the run and he finds himself at Mount Horeb. He’s tired and hungry. He wants to give up. He’s alone. He’s afraid.

In our Gospel, the disciples are not alone, totally. They have each other, but Jesus is not with them, at first. Jesus was taking some ‘Jesus and Yahweh’ time up on the mountain. Meanwhile, the disciples are without him, on the lake in a fishing boat. And that’s when the wind and waves come up. Evening comes and they don’t have electric lights, maybe a lamp or two. It’s dark.

That’s when they see a figure, out in the water. Someone yells “Ghost!” And a boat full of grown men scream, and begin to scramble. But then the figure talks to them, “It’s just me. Jesus. It’s ok.” But the figure is still fuzzy, because, well, there are waves and it’s dark. So Peter says, “If it is you Lord, command me to come out there on the water with you.” And Jesus says, “Come.” And there in the dark, amidst the waves, Peter steps out of a boat and walks, on top of the chaotic, dark, churning water and waves. But then notices that he is walking on chaotic dark churning waves. And Peter doesn’t just flounder because he takes his eyes off of Jesus, but because he grows afraid. And, quite frankly, that fear is justified. It’s a storm raging powerfully enough to sink the boat, let alone drown a single person.

He, like Elijah, has perfectly good reason to be afraid. And so do we. Real, break your heart, keep you from sleep reasons. Reasons that come with questions: What if they reject me? Will the illness return? Does grief like this ever end. How will we say goodbye? What if they get hurt? Will the deportation police knock on our door? What if the chaos in Ukraine and Russia turns to something more? Is my small business going to make it? Will healthcare be there for my loved one when they need it?

Fear can be mobilizing, keep us safe, drive us to action. But it can also be debilitating. Sneaking up on us and freezing us, a paralysis that keeps us from being who we’re meant to be.

Fear can freeze us and holds us back. Like a pair of tandem bikers: huffing and puffing at the top of a steep hill. One says to the other, “That was a stiff climb!” “Yeah,” said the second, and if I hadn’t kept the brake on, we would’ve slid down backwards, too!”

Sometimes I wonder, whether fear is one of the primary things that robs us of the abundant life God intends for us. So, what does faith do to fear? I could risk getting going all “Pollyanna” on you, start singing ‘don’t worry be happy’ or talk about places over rainbows. But I won’t because I’ve sat with too many devastated people in my office, held hands in the ER of too many people who have been crippled by pain and fear. What I will do, is ask: Where is God when we are afraid?

While Elijah was frozen in that cave, there is a wind, and fire, and earthquake. Terrifying, I’m sure, especially since he was alone. But then there is silence. Sheer silence. And a still small voice comes to him. Giving comfort, and purpose.

In response to Peter’s fear, Jesus doesn’t simply urge him to continue. He doesn’t instruct Peter to keep his eyes on him. Instead, when Peter begins to sink, Jesus reaches out and grabs him, saving him from drowning, and gets him back in the boat with the rest of the disciples, where he always belonged.

When fear would overcome us, Christ reaches out, grabs a hold of us, pulls us into communities that help us together rise above fear. God will never let you go. God is with you. That is a promise. And this promise, helps us cope with and transcend fear. Transcend, not defeat. As pastor David Lose once said, “Fear is part of our lives. Courage after all, isn’t the absence of fear, but the ability to take our stand and do what needs to be done even when we are afraid.”

Elijah, in the cave, after the Lord is with him, is given a call—back to his community. Peter, is pulled back into the boat. His story isn’t over. He is more than his fears. His faults and his failings don’t disqualify him from love, from being in the boat. The boat, filled with other broken people, trying to follow Jesus. We are not meant to face our fears alone. To lend each other a hand when we’re falling, perhaps that’s the only work that matters in the end.

Amen.