PENTECOST 9, B – July 25, 2021

SCRIPTURES – Genesis 9:8-17; Eph. 3:14-21; Mark 6:45-56; Ps. 145

*About the fourth watch of the night [Jesus] came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, 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.” And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.* Mark 6

Today in Mark 6 we hear of an incredible work of Jesus ― but it was *not* that He walked on the Sea of Galilee; on waters made choppy as the wind kicked up waves. The disciples may have struggled all night against the wind and waves, but not Jesus. Walking on the water was easy for Him! ***“Take heart; I AM. Do not be afraid,”*** He said to His disciples after they saw Him and, thinking he was a ghost, cried out in fear. Jesus didn’t just say, *“Hey, guys, it’s me.”* No, in each of the three Gospels which record this for us, Jesus’ response is clear: ***“Take heart; I AM.”*** The almighty and eternal God whose name is I AM; who created the earth and the seas, and who set boundaries for the seas, saying, ***“Thus far shall you come, and no farther; here shall your proud waves be stayed”*** (Job 38:11) – this is who is before you! ***“Take heart; I AM. Do not be afraid!”***

Walking on that lake was no amazing work for Jesus. He’s the **I AM**… the almighty and eternal Creator… creation’s master! Mindless nature is easily under His control! No, the truly incredible work of Jesus that night was that He walked to His disciples and joined them in the boat. Why was this incredible? Well, consider the people mentioned in today’s Scriptures and what we know about them.

* Noah: he found favor in the eyes of the Lord and was a righteous man, Gen. 6:8-9 says. This is why he, along with his wife and 3 sons and their wives, were saved from the flood which God sent to destroy the rest of mankind, because they were so wicked. But, what did righteous Noah do after he and his family got off the ark? He worshiped and thanked God… received from God the sign of the rainbow and the blessing of its promise… and then got drunk and passed out naked. What a righteous man! (Of course, if I had spent a year on a boat with my wife and kids and a bunch of animals I had to feed and clean up after – and had no indoor plumbing, by the way – I think I’d be wanting a drink or two, also!)
* Jesus’ disciples, including James, whom we remember and honor today as a saint of God: they had seen Jesus do incredible miracles of healing, and just the day before had seen Him miraculously feed over 5,000 people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Now they see Him walking on water! And how do they respond? ***“They were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened,”*** Mark says. Men with hard hearts who can’t, or won’t, understand who Jesus is! That’s the disciples.

These people – Noah… the disciples – they’re the best of us, aren’t they? The closest to God. The best believers. And hard-hearted sinners! How much more are you and I.

And yet, even we have been incredibly blessed in Christ! God doesn’t just dwell in the heavens, far above, and far from, us. Our Savior ***“dwells in our hearts through faith,”*** Paul says in Eph. 3 says. He goes on to say that in Him we are ***“filled with all the fullness of God”*** – and so, the entire Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, lives and dwells within you who believe in Jesus. Vignette received this blessing today in her Baptism, even though she didn’t ask for this and cannot yet even begin to realize or understand this. In fact, none of us will ever in this life fully realize or understand this. Nor will we fully honor our God and Savior for His incredible goodness and faithfulness to us. Instead, we will go on sinning.

* Abusing alcohol, like Noah. “Oh, not me,” you say. Ok: what do you abuse, then? Medicines? Food? TV? The internet? Time?
* Exposing other’s sins by talking and gossiping about them, as Noah’s son Ham did when he saw his father lying naked and drunk in his tent. Oh, how quick we are to do this, especially on social media!
* Seeing rainbows, and other signs of God’s favor – above all, the signs of His eternal mercy and presence in the water of Holy Baptism, and the bread and wine of Holy Communion – and taking them for granted; as if we deserve them!
* Putting ourselves and our desires first, and before others, as James did when he, along with John, asked to be able to sit at Jesus’ right and left – the places of the greatest honor – in His kingdom. *“Serve? And, serve those ungrateful and undeserving people who don’t appreciate me? Not me! Let me be appreciated first!”*

Jesus faced such attitudes. For Him, walking among and with us sinners meant constantly walking through a minefield of sinful human expectations… desires… emotions… irritations… the list could go on and on. Frankly, the sea is far more under God’s control than are our minds and hearts!

And yet, Jesus not only walked among us sinners. He walked with us. He joined His hard-hearted, misunderstanding disciples in their boat. He offered Himself to the crowds who rushed up to Him when He landed, seeking healing for their sicknesses and injuries and infirmities. And He offers Himself to us this very day, even when we are the most weak in faith and sinful. He chooses to do so because He loves every one of us: gladly… willingly… and sacrificially, to His own detriment. He loved us so much that He took upon and within Himself our lack of understanding and our hard-heartedness, and every sinful way they express themselves, and He became us – utter sinners, within and without. He then was lifted up before His holy and righteous Father – the God who, in His hatred of sin, poured out a flood of water upon the earth in the days of Noah to destroy every wicked, unbelieving sinner. Upon a cross Jesus endured God’s hatred of and judgment of our sins, and He was condemned for them instead of you... instead of me.

Jesus has saved us… that His love might change us! That we might be ***“rooted and grounded in [His] love, [and so] have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, [and] be filled with all the fullness of God.”*** (Eph. 3) And, why? For yourself and your glory? No! That you might live like Jesus and serve like Jesus. That you might not walk away from stubborn, hard-hearted people but might walk to them and serve them with a love that is willing to sacrifice for them, that they, too, might be saved, and might enjoy the blessings of His love that you enjoy.

James was changed by this love of Jesus. He who had asked for glory became the first of the apostles to be put to death. Herod Agrippa – the grandson of the Herod who wanted to kill Jesus when He was born, and the nephew of the Herod who beheaded John the Baptist – put James to death with the sword, Acts 12:1-3 says. He lost his life because he proclaimed the love of Jesus… and by that love of Jesus – the **I AM**, the eternally living God before whom death itself cowers in fear – he now lives with Him in heaven.

Hold onto Christ’s love and love. Hold onto His service and serve. All to the glory of God the Father, ***“who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the Power [ of His Holy Spirit] at work within us. To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.”*** (Eph. 3) Amen!