

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 11
August 13, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Dan Pautz
The Lord strengthens the Christian's Faith

—Matthew 14:23-34

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed the crowd, he went up onto the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. ²⁴ By then the boat was quite a distance from shore, being pounded by the waves because the wind was against it. ²⁵ In the fourth watch of the night Jesus came toward them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and cried out in fear, "It's a ghost!" ²⁷ But Jesus spoke to them at once, saying, "Take heart! It is I! Do not be afraid." ²⁸ Peter answered him and said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ Jesus said, "Come!" Peter stepped down from the boat, walked on the water, and went toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the strong wind, he was afraid. As he began to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand, took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. ³³ Those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God!" ³⁴ When they had crossed over, they came to the shore at Gennesaret.

This is the last sermon in the series titled "Define: Christian". A Christian is one who believes in the Triune God. He has faith in Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He seeks to live a life of faith. He repents of sins.

Some might think that the Christian is always a rock of faith with rarely if ever any weaknesses or doubts. But that is not how it is. Moses had times of spiritual struggle. We see Elijah in the Old Testament reading for this Sunday in need of spiritual strength and encouragement. Naomi had her period of time when she had become very bitter. In today's sermon text Peter doubted and needed strength. Ongoing strengthening of faith is needed by every Christian, and the Lord provides that strength. Our faith is like a cell phone that needs to be recharged regularly.

Oh, what an exciting and glorious day it was! The disciples had seen a great miracle and they were a part of it. Jesus had fed 5000 people with only five barley loaves and two small fish. The disciples had a part in it by distributing the food to the people. Everyone was filled. And then the disciples gathered the leftovers – there were twelve basketfuls. There were leftovers than the food they had to begin with. Jesus then told the disciples to sail back over the Sea of Galilee to Gennesaret where He would meet them later. He wanted some lone time to pray. The Sea of Galilee is not small. It is about 64 square miles, about twice the size of Roosevelt Lake when that lake is full as it is now.

Can you imagine the excited conversation among the disciples in the boat as they talked about their Lord Jesus and the awesome miracle of the feeding of the 5000? Oh, we would like to have heard them. But then it happened. A storm came up – no longer did they focus on the feeding of the 5000 but they were battling the fierce storm. Matthew who was in the boat described the situation. "The boat was quite a distance from shore, being pounded by the waves because the wind was against it." It was terrifying! The day had gone so well but now this! My dad and my brother Curt were fishing for walleyes on Green Bay. Although they kept an eye on any approaching storm, a fierce storm caught by surprise. They feared that the boat might tip. They could not see where they were going. The motor was useless. They drifted and by God's grace drifted to shore. The day for them had started off well but ended with near tragedy,

Perhaps you have had a similar experience. You were having a wonderful day – it was one of those super special days. Things had gone so well but then sad things happened. Maybe you or someone became very sick. Or it was an out-of-state phone call that came with sad news. Maybe it was a car accident. Perhaps at the end of the good day there was a family fight and a lot of unneeded drama and trauma.

It wasn't looking good for the disciples. The storm was awful. It was between 3 to 5 am. Now on top of it all someone was walking on water toward them. They were terrified! "It's a ghost!" they yelled. But it was Jesus. "Jesus spoke to them at once, saying, "Take heart! It is I! Do not be afraid." Peter answered him and said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come!" What would you have done? If Jesus said to you, "Come," would you have come? Would you have put one leg across the edge of the boat? Then the other? And slide down onto the crashing waves?

Peter did! He actually walked on water toward Jesus. He trusted the Lord's Word. That was faith. But wait a minute. "But when he saw the strong wind, he was afraid. As he began to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand, took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Jesus scolded Peter, did He not? "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Jesus did not say, "You of no faith." Peter still had faith but, as Jesus said, he was of little faith.

Some might think that a characteristic of a Christian is one who never doubts or never has times of spiritual weakness or who is never afraid. He is like a super-Christian whose faith never wavers and who never worries about anything or anyone. And on top of it all he hardly ever sins. Does this sound like you? True, the Lord does not want you to doubt or be afraid or worry. But it does not work that way, does it? Look at fellow believers in the Bible. Joshua needed special strength and assurance from the Lord. Job had his spiritual episodes as he challenged God's fairness. John the Baptist who was the great preacher, pointing out Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, had to be strengthened when he was unjustly jailed. He sent two of his followers to Jesus to ask Him whether He indeed was the promised Christ. Jesus did strengthen him. On the list of Christians whose faith needs strengthening, you and I could add our names.

There remains the ongoing and daily attacks upon our faith by the big three enemies of faith, the devil, the sinful world, and our sinful nature. We need continual strengthening.

But listed here are some situations in which we might especially have fears and doubts and anxieties.

- Sickesses and accidents that you have or a family member has. Maybe it might be cancer or heart issues.
- Matters relating to work such as job insecurity or even loss of job and you wonder whether and how God will take care of you
- Financial insecurity as bills mount up even though you are not a big-time spender but are thrifty and wise
- Fears of being single or fears of getting married
- Afraid of being in a new school and not knowing anyone
- Things we are told to be afraid of such as climate change as if God no longer is in control – we can have concerns but be careful of fear
- Fears for the wellbeing of our nation – Again we can have concerns but be careful of anxiety
- Fussing and fretting and worrying about this and that

When Peter took his focus off of Jesus, he began to sink. And so when we take our eyes off of Jesus and His Word, our faith begins to sink. In all fearful matters and times of doubt we need to turn to Jesus. Jesus helps us always and especially in times of weakness and fears and doubts. Jesus did not tell Peter, "You of little faith. Just go ahead and sink. Sink or swim." We do not know how far Peter was sinking. Was it up to his kneecaps? His waist? His chin? But Jesus stretched out his hand and took hold of him and saved him. Jesus also reaches out to you and me to help us and strengthen us; and we all need that, don't we?

A characteristic of a Christian that we emphasize today is one whom the Lord Jesus continues to strengthen and help throughout his life. Well, what should we do in the middle of difficulties and doubts? Seven things will be listed.

1. One thing to do is to pray. "Call upon me in the day of trouble;" the Lord says, "I will deliver you, and you will honor me." (Psalm 50:15) It was Peter who wrote later "Cast all your anxiety upon Him for He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7)

Think of the hymn,

What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sin and griefs to bear.
What a privilege to carry Everything to Him in prayer
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry Everything to Him in prayer.

Sometimes there might be only enough time for a short prayer. That was the case with Peter. "Lord, Save me!" For us it might be "O God, help me." Or "Lord, please have mercy." And you can be sure that the Lord will help either by sparing you from the problem or giving you the strength to bear with it. He promises to make all things work together for the good of those who love him.

2. Remember also God's precious Word. Our faith is not strengthened through our talking to God but the Holy Spirit strengthens faith and shatters worries and fears through His Word. Here are a few Bible passages,

- Read the powerful and comforting epistle reading for this Sunday from Romans 8:28-39.
- Here is a verse that a nurse facing surgery said was very, very comforting. Remember nurses and medical people are aware of all the wonderful outcomes of surgeries but also of all the things that could

go wrong. It is Psalm 27:1, “The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall, I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?”

- Here is another comforting passage spoken first of all to Joshua and then to all of us, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9)
- Psalm 46 is great – Here are a few verses,
 - “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, (Verse 1)
 - The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Verses 7 & 11)
 - “Be still and know that I am God.” Verses 10
- “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5)
- Psalm 23 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff – they comfort me.

3. Maybe we wonder and even doubt whether our sins are forgiven. As we get older, we might see even more clearly the sins of years ago. David prayed, “Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD.” We older ones could and should add “Remember not the sins of my middle age years; remember not the sins of my older years.” Let the cross remind you that your sins have been paid for in full. Fellow Christians, Look at what the Lord says in the Bible. Here are a few passages. ‘

- The blood of Jesus Christ His Son purifies us from all sins. (1 John 1:7)
- “Come now, let us reason together, “says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

4. Read the stories of the men and women of the Bible and see how God was with them, comforting and strengthening them.

5. Come to communion and receive the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, the strengthening of faith, and the strength to Live a God-pleasing life with a good attitude despite pains, pressures, and problems. After you have received communion the pastor says, “Now may the true body and blood strengthen and preserve you in the true faith unto life everlasting, Depart in peace. Amen

6. Read or sing hymns. The hymns in our hymnal have their roots in many parts of the Bible. Here are a few suggested hymns:

- Our God Our Help in Ages Past
- Just As I Am
- Rock of Ages
- It Is Well With My Soul
- In Christ Alone
- Amazing Grace
- Children of the Heavenly Father
- On Eagle's Wings

- Be still my soul the Lord is on thy side
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain
Leave to thy God to order and provide
In every change He faithful will remain
Be still my soul thy best, thy heavenly friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end

Be still, my soul, thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as He has the past
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake
All now mysterious shall be bright at last
Be still, my soul, the waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below

7. When worried and plagued with doubts, speak to a fellow believer or to your pastor or a Christian counselor. Emmanuel belongs to a Christian counseling service.

God strengthens the Christian at all times.

This sermon will close with verses from a hymn.

Oh for a faith that will not shrink
Tho' pressed by many a foe,
That will not tremble on the brink
Of poverty or woe.

Lord, give us such a faith as this,
And then, whate'er may come,
We'll taste e'en now the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home.