

“God Is in Our Hearts”

How many of you remember the story, from 2009, of Captain Sully landing safely on the Hudson? Can you imagine being a passenger? The plane takes off, the engines get knocked out, and it is obvious that the plane is going down. All you see is a closed cockpit door. What is going on behind that door? Are we going to die? People start to pray, and calling out to the Lord is the right thing to do. We all know that the story had a happy ending, where everyone on that plane was saved.

Now can you imagine being one of the disciples in the boat? Jesus had sent them ahead. By the time they reached the middle of the Galilean Sea, it was pitch dark, the wind was against them, and the waves were battering the boat. In their fear, they forgot to call on the Lord. It was not until early in the morning that Jesus came to them. Some commentators say it was about 4 AM, and others say it was somewhere between 3 AM and 6 AM. Either way, imagine spending almost the entire night in the dark, in a storm, wondering where Jesus is, and whether you are going to survive.

It must have been the same feeling as being in a plane that is going down, while looking at a closed cockpit door, and wondering what is going to happen.

It is the same spiritual feeling that our church experienced during COVID, namely, fear. Are we going down? Will churches become obsolete? But, we all prayed and called out to the Lord, and our church was saved. God guided us, and strengthened us in the process, and our church emerged much stronger.

It is the same type of fear that some of us may have right now. We are still without a pastor, and all we see are the closed doors of session and search committee meetings. Some of us feel like we are in the dark, adrift, just sitting with our fears, and wondering if God has forgotten about us. We are afraid that we might not survive this spiritual turbulence. But, keep in mind that God is always with us. Just as He told Joshua, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” We just have to remember that God is with us. And we have to remember to pray and call out to the Lord.

Back in Jesus’ time, the disciples in the boat undoubtedly had the same existential fear that continues to pop up in life today. One time it’s fear for our

church. Another time it's fear for our health because of a scary diagnosis. And another time, it's fear about the salvation of a loved one. These are the heavy, spiritual storms of life. Like Peter stepping out in faith, we feel ourselves starting to sink, the moment fear gets a grip on our ankles, and our faith falters. But, thankfully, our salvation does not depend on our ability to maintain steadfast faith, in the face of fear. God will not let us drown.

So let us go through the story of Jesus walking on the water, where the disciples are fearing drowning. But first, let's understand the passage from Romans, which explains the theological significance of the story.

The book of Romans was written towards the end of Paul's third missionary journey. In verse 5, Paul mentions that Moses wrote about righteousness that comes from the Law. In the days of Moses, people believed that, if you obeyed all of the laws, then God would declare you righteous. Then, in verses 6 and 7, Paul contrasts that with righteousness that comes from Faith. He says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). Let's hear it in the First Nations Version: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will go up into the spirit-world above?' — to bring the Chosen One down — or 'Who will go down into the deep dark pit of the world below?' — to raise the Chosen One up from the dead."

Moving on to verse 8: "the word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart...". Of course, the word "word" has multiple meanings. Recall John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In Romans 10, Paul addresses what to do when God feels far away. Do you send someone to heaven to fetch Him by finding someone who can perfectly obey the rules? Or do you send someone downstairs to look for Him in the dead world so you can ask his advice? Verse 8 reminds us that the Word is near you. Verse 9 follows: "because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That's all it takes. Anyone can do that. Salvation is for everyone, even if your faith falters from time to time.

If you're worried about your faith, that you might not truly believe, remember Ephesians 2 verse 8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works...". This means you don't have to "try harder" to believe, or to perfectly obey a complex

set of rules. Instead, you just have to accept God's gift of faith. So even if you're in a storm, and God feels far away, He isn't far at all. He is right there in your own heart. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the entire triune God is present everywhere. Therefore, we can be absolutely certain that God is right here, living inside our very hearts. As the Lord told the Israelites, through the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 41, "...do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

So, back to the rest of the Romans passage: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on Him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Salvation is for all people, regardless of their ancestry or past. In verses 14 and 15, Paul points out that people cannot call on the Lord unless they believe, they cannot believe unless they hear, and they cannot hear unless a messenger is sent to proclaim Him. The passage ends with "it is written," referencing Isaiah 52:7: "how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" This mention of salvation was back in the Old Testament! And God promises multiple times in the Old Testament to be with us. So, in summary, the three key points of the Romans passage are: 1) God is as near as your heart, 2) salvation is for all people, and 3) everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

With that background, let's go back to the story of Jesus walking on the water. Per Jesus' orders, the disciples are stuck in the boat, in the dark, in a storm, and they are very afraid. After a sleepless night, Jesus comes walking to them on the sea. When the disciples see him, they are terrified, saying "it is a ghost." So they don't even recognize Him, because their fear has spiritually blinded them. And they cry out in fear. Notice that they are not calling on the Lord yet; they are just crying out to nobody in particular. Then, Jesus immediately spoke to them and said, "take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." The phrase "it is I" is the same phrase that Yahweh used to describe who He is, so they knew exactly what He meant, namely, that Jesus IS God. The great "I Am." They saw, and believed.

Then Peter steps up. He says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "Come." So Peter gets out of the boat, starts walking on the water, and comes toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong winds, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save

me!” Notice that, unlike the frightened disciples who just screamed, Peter specifically cried out to the Lord. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him. When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Verse 33 tells the happy ending: “And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly, you are the son of God.’” So, not only did Jesus save Peter, but also He saved everyone in the boat. They witnessed His saving grace, and received His gracious gift of faith.

So how does all of this apply to our life today? It teaches us three essential lessons: 1) God is close at hand, even when it doesn’t feel that way; 2) Salvation is for all; and 3) We can call out to our Lord. Sound familiar? These are the same lessons we learned in the Romans passage. These lessons teach us that we can step out in faith, rather than fear, because we know that God will stretch out His hand, and not let us drown. We know this because God is with us, He is faithful, and His steadfast love endures forever. And all of this reminds us to trust God, to rest assured that our salvation is secure, and to worship Him.

This applies today, to any existential fears that people may have about this church. Number one: God is with us, even if He feels distant, or if we fear that He has forgotten about us and left us stranded. In fact, this is His church, and He is strengthening us and helping us, just as He did during COVID.

Number two: salvation is for all. So even if people are afraid, or if they falter, God stretches out His hand, and keeps us from hitting rock bottom. Salvation is even for people who just sit in the boat and wait, like the disciples did. God saved everyone in the boat, even, or perhaps especially, the frightened ones.

Number three: we can call on the Lord. This means that we can faithfully step out of our comfort zone and draw even closer to Jesus. We know that He will save us, even if our faith falters in the face of fear, and even if we start to slip and fall. We can have faith that our story will have a happy ending, not because we are perfectly obedient followers of His commandments, but because we have God’s gracious gift of faith, because God is faithful, and His steadfast love endures forever.

Let us pray.