“Let Go of the Fear and Cling to Faith”

If you ask most people what the opposite of “faith” is, they would probably answer “doubt”. And even our English translation of our gospel lesson today has Jesus using that word, but in the Greek text, the word isn’t “doubt”, but “hesitate”. Usually Jesus, and scripture in general, uses another word to describe the opposite of faith: and that word is “fear”. And that's what both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons are about today. [There’s not time to look at both lessons today, so we’re just going to look at the gospel, but I do urge you to take your bulletins home and re-read the first lesson again later to reflect on how the qualities of faith and fear play out in the story of Elijah.]

So, here’s the set up for our gospel story: Right before today’s pericope, we find the disciples caught in an impossible situation. They were out in a deserted place with over 5,000 hungry people and only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, and Jesus has commanded them to feed everybody! Well, with Jesus’ help, they accomplish this amazing feat, and then the disciples all get back in their boat. They probably want nothing more to do than to sit back, relax, and enjoy thinking back on the miraculous events of the day and their part in them, but instead they find themselves up all night, battling the wind and the waves. They make it until just before dawn when they see something moving towards them on the water. It must be a ghost – or maybe it’s the angel of death! Oh no, they’re going to die! The boat is going to capsize and they’re going to drown! Or this ghost, this monster, whatever it is, is going to gobble them up! Terrified, they cry out in fear.

But immediately, Jesus speaks to them and they breathe a sigh of relief. Faith returns – fear flees – it’s the Lord!

Peter is so glad to see Jesus that he can’t wait for Jesus to get to him; he goes to Jesus instead. But the wind kicks up, he starts to sink; and, filled with fear, he calls out, “Lord, save me!”

The problem in this story is not so much the situations in which the disciples find themselves, but how they react to these situations. It’s not the figure walking towards the disciples that’s the problem – it’s their fear of it. And it’s not the wind and waves that cause Peter to sink – it’s his fear. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “we have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

Lifeguards know that truth. It’s not really difficult to save a drowning person – unless that person panics. Then it can become nearly impossible. Or think about the stock market. It really doesn’t matter what the economy is actually doing. If people are afraid, their fear will keep the market down.
There are so many things in our lives that can cause us to fear –
starting school, taking exams, applying to college, getting married, expecting a baby,
facing medical tests or surgery, being unemployed, suffering illness,
having a best friend move away, having a beloved family member die –
And if we let fear overtake us, then our fears will probably be realized.

The fact is, we all face fearful situations, just like the disciples and Peter.
For the disciples, there was certainly the danger of the storm and the possible danger this apparition could cause, but ever more dangerous was the fact that they might panic, and that their panic would lead to their destruction
For Peter, there was certainly the danger that he would drown.
But even more dangerous was the possibility
that he would forget to turn to Jesus for help just when he needed it the most.

Whenever we find ourselves in fear-filled situations, there are usually both inner and outer dangers.
There is the outer, external danger of the particular circumstance,
but there is also the inner danger that we will simply allow the circumstance to defeat us,
that we will give in to doubt and despair,
that we will lose the hope and the faith that keep us living the way God intends for us to live.

I am sure you have all heard stories of people who have survived horrific situations because they have not given up.
Well, there are times in all of our lives when hope and faith may seem to be draining away,
but the good news is that they never need to run out.

Our gospel story today reminds us that no matter what fear we face – and we will continue to face fears –
the one thing that is sure is that God will not abandon us.
Just as Jesus caught up with the disciples, reassured them, and stilled the storm,
so Jesus will walk with us, comforting us, as we are tossed about upon the sea of life.
And just as Jesus reached out his hand to catch Peter,
so Jesus will keep us from sinking into the depths of despair.

The good news that we proclaim here today is that God in Jesus is always present to us – even in our darkest hours.
Yes, there may be times when it is hard to see Christ amidst the winds and waves and storms of life.
But, if we keep listening and keep watching –
if we keep praying and worshipping and studying God’s Word and serving God’s people,
we will see our Lord and we will feel Christ’s hand holding us up.

The fears in each of our lives will continue.
But we do not have to give in to fear; we do not have to give in to doubt or despair,
for God is with us even in our most fear filled moments.

You and I have each other, and we have God –
the God who takes our fear away and fills us with courage,
the God who takes our doubts away and turns them into faith,
the God who will not let hope disappoint us.

Yes, our fears will, “without a doubt”, continue.
But more certain even than that, God’s love will continue, too.
May each one of us this day allow God’s reassuring presence
to take away our fears, and fill us with faith. Amen