

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

'And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.'

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My mother used to say that there is no such thing as an irrational fear of heights, since a short drop and a sudden stop will indeed kill you. Similarly, there is no such thing as an irrational fear of the sea.

We, who erect massive steel hulks to sail into the blue waters, whether on cruise liners or freight ships; whether in nuclear submarines or the dreadnaughts of the past age; we forget that the sea is, above all else, that place where man has no business being. In such ships, we feel safe, for such ships are arks, a land established in the midst of the sea. But that makes the sea itself no less murderous.

It is the unformed world, constantly changing, endlessly surging and dashing; A realm of chaos, where no firm footing may ever be found; seemingly endless, and suffocating, and toxifying, for though it be made of water, it is a water which does not alleviate thirst, but brings it, and with it, death.

And if one does not drown by the waters themselves, the deep awakens voracious and betentacled evils by which you will eventually be drug down into the blackness of the waters and be consumed. [Devoured by such monstrosities.]

It should be no surprise that most ancient cultures, from Norway to Mongolia, from Mesopotamia to Mesoamerica, believe some creation myth, where a great god symbolizing civilization kills the god of the sea, whether it be a dragon or a great sea serpent or a patrolling sea hawk. How can man live, if this ancient chaos is not first defeated, and the world of men be made from its flesh? The sea must be slain, that is to say, the lawless god of this world, it would seem, if order and human life are to survive.

Now the Lord speaks to His disciples, and *makes them get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida*. He does not go along with them. Rather, He sends them alone, as He Himself goes to *the mountain to pray*. He sends them alone, into the sea.

And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them.

In both Greek and Hebrew, the word for 'wind' and 'spirit' are the same; and indeed, in the tiny ark of the Church, the wind, the spirit of the sea is ever against us; and who would deny that the hull, crafted of the wood of the cross, makes its way across the maddening sea of this world only *painfully*. For the spirit of the world is against us. And this spirit is no mere 'idea in the water', no simple 'cultural shift'. It is the 'Spirit of this Age' which opposes itself to the God who is unto the Ages of Ages. It is the devil himself who rules the world, rules the sea, sends forth its waves against the bulwarks of the Church, tosses it upon the crests, that it may be drowned within the sea, that there the faith of many might be consumed by demonic spirits; or crushed upon the rocks of the shallow, and how the devil would love to drown men in shallowness.

Yet into this sea the Lord sends us. A world of doubt, cynicism, hatred, and temptation. Temptation by luxury, for Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Temptation by animosity, for Satan is the great Leviathan *whose breath is fire, that no spear can slay*. For if Abraham was to be tried on Mount Horeb, if Christ was to be tried on Mount Zion, should we, who are sons of Abraham and the body of Christ, not be tried in this sea of suffering until we find rest upon the firm ground of Mount Ararat?

We must be tried, for we are *being conformed unto the image of Christ*. We must be tempted, for we must *complete the sufferings of Christ*. Therefore, the Lord commands His disciples to enter the ship of the Church and go out *before him* into the sea.

Now the disciples were struggling against the wind of the waters. And yet a strange thing happens, and strange in many ways. *At about the fourth watch of the night, the Lord came, walking on the sea, and He meant to pass them by.*

It may seem miraculous enough that Christ would walk upon the waters, but it should not seem that odd to us, for the Lord has always hovered over the waters

of creation, making order out of chaos. For such He did in the beginning, when the world was *formless and void*. If such was the Lord's pleasure then, why would it be any less His pleasure now? [And if the sea, and all it represents, be filled with demonic evil, may he trod on, for *he shall make the world his footstool.*]

Yet it is written: '*He meant to pass them by.*' Why does He mean to pass them by? It is because He must *go before the disciples* and *accomplish the will of the Father*. It is because He must lead, that the disciples might *take up their cross and follow Him*. It is because He must tread upon the ancient serpent, the god of this world, the destruction of the sea. All these things He must do, that He might become *all in all*.

But we, who are weak, are terrified in this life, and indeed we make our *headway painfully*. The disciples cry out for Him. And though He meant to *pass them by*, yet He turns, and comes to them, for He who is both God and God's image, for He is man, cannot stand to pass by unscathed by the prayers of His brothers according to the flesh, His beautiful humanity. He turns, and enters the boat, and there, dwells with His brothers, His friends. He hears the prayers of the fearful, and enters into their fear, dwelling within the Church, in His own flesh and blood, in the midst of all the torment of life; here He is, in flesh, and in blood, in His ark, His Church, His own body, *for no man ever hated his own body*.

Looking at the disciples, in the midst of the sea, He speaks to them, *and said, 'Take heart, it is I, Do not be afraid.'* For He is the Lord.

'Do not be afraid, it is I.' Did I not promise you long ago, to the father of all fathers? To Noah and to his children forever? Did I not promise?

'The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Genesis

9:8-17; Ephesians 3:14-21; Mark 6:45-56.