

ASH WEDNESDAY

Lord, You are strong! Yet by our own sin we are weak. In our sin we become confused. We question Your presence near us and Your care for us. So often we accuse You of not caring for us. We confess as sin every time we have not trusted in You. We confess as sin our lack of faith that doubts Your care for us and those we love. In lament, we reflect on our sin being ash and leading only to death.

ASH WEDNESDAY • Mark 4:35–41 • Michael Thornton • February 26, 2020

Good Evening Church! What a privilege to be gathered together with you on this special night, this Ash Wednesday night, when we remember together that without the love of God all would be like ash. But thanks be to God, for coming to us and rescuing us, for giving us beauty for ashes, for replacing our heart of stone with a heart of flesh—for replacing our heart of fear with a heart of courageous faith.

Ash Wednesday, tonight, has a certain weight of sadness embedded deep down in a special way. As we enter into the season of Lent, we weep over our sinful nature that put Christ on the cross; this is a heaviness of lament that our souls cannot bear. Yet it is precious here, in our death because of our transgressions, that light breaks forth. “As for you,” writes the apostle Paul, “you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world. . . . But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 1:1–2a, 4–5). So tonight we lament, yes. Is there anything more heart-breaking than to know it is us who have sinned, us who are responsible for Eternal God, purity and innocence Himself, to be beaten and crucified? Yet, because of His great love for us, we are saved! We are being sanctified! We will be glorified! So, friends, let us not only weep together tonight, but let us also magnify God for the love He so freely and joyfully pours out that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.

Our text this evening is Mark 4:35–41. Mark is the second of the four gospels. The gospels are the precious, holy and God-breathed historical recordings of the life of Jesus, the Christ, the son of the living God. Church family, let us hear together Holy Scripture on this special night: That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

Let’s join together in prayer. Almighty God, at Your voice the raging seas cease. O God, may Your nearness, even at this very moment, bring the raging seas of our bent hearts to rest completely in You, to be totally satisfied in You, to thirst only for You and Your righteousness. May Your perfect peace that surpasses our understanding be felt anew

this evening. Speak to us now, Father, by Your Spirit and through Your Son, Amen.

I want to acknowledge our children and youth who are worshipping with us this evening. I know it’s not always the easiest thing to sit through a worship service, but we believe that being here together is for your greatest good and I’m so happy you’re in this room with us. We need you! I want to remind you again that we love you so much. I want to remind you again that so many of our deepest prayers and highest hopes are with you

I have a question for everyone to help us think about our passage this evening: What is the most terrifying situation you have ever been in? If I’m at all to begin to be honest, I must confess that some of the things I fear the most still have a hold on me. I know that because as I was preparing this sermon I realized I cannot even stomach the idea of sharing some of them in front of you all tonight. What a reminder of the growth required for anyone desiring to be a disciple of Jesus. We cannot be idle in the pursuit of our growth. We need one another. The Holy Spirit so often uses our close, intimate community to help draw out from our lives things we hardly knew existed. I take these deep fears not to the many, but to the few. I joyfully boast in God’s goodness and grace in my life! God has given me a close circle of friends that know every detail and fight for me in prayer and encouragement. Experiencing this gift is why we as your church leadership encourage you and pray for you to “find your circle.” Fight with everything you have to come alongside a handful of brothers or sisters where you lay everything out, wash it all in prayer, and apply the Scriptures to one another—and then go out as disciples to be the incarnational salt and light of the world! Friends, as I speak there are tens of thousands of people in this very city walking without resurrection hope. May our souls be in turmoil until we are so passionate about the cause of Christ that we truly live the faith-filled, spirit-empowered, sacrifice-laden, incarnational lives that our Father desires for us. For our good, for God’s glory, and for the salvation of many!

Let’s circle back to the story our passage is presenting us with. The disciples describe a terrifying situation. Think about it: Here we have professional fisherman out on their home turf, their home lake, and they are so convinced that death by drowning is imminent that they turn to a woodworker, “the carpenter’s boy,” for help. The fishermen, on a stormy sea, turn to the carpenter—did you catch that?! Our text describes the situation as “a furious squall” and “waves breaking over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.” It’s dark, it’s violent, it’s loud, and death feels very, very near. The disciples, like many of us, panic. They begin to try and yell over the storm. In Matthew’s account, they’re yelling, “Lord!” In Mark’s account, they’re yelling, “Teacher!” In Luke’s account, they’re yelling, “Master!”

And then there's Jesus, the Son of God, fully God and fully man, curled up in the stern of the boat, the back of the boat, hugging a pillow in the most comfortable, relaxed position, exhausted from a full day of preaching the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven, and he's completely, 100 percent ... asleep. I think of the song, "The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay," but this time it's "the fully grown Jesus asleep in the stern." It doesn't quite have the same ring to it, but I hope you "get the picture" of the God-man exhausted from a hard day's work, sleeping through a storm in the back of a small boat. "Lord!" "Teacher!" "Master!" "Lord!" "Teacher!" "Master!" And now the disciples, very likely don't you think, are becoming frustrated. "Lord!" "Teacher!" "Master!" "Lord!" "Teacher!" "Master!" Jesus wakes up. And I imagine Peter, dear Peter, holding tight to Jesus' clothes, with their faces only a few inches from each other, waves violently smashing into the boat and intense spray from the sea screaming past their faces, yelling over the storm, "Don't you care if we drown?"

I met John Stevens differently than most of you. I met John Stevens for the first time on the video screen right here in the Sanctuary during Vision Weekend. For so many of you Rev. Stevens is not so much Rev. Stevens as John, a dear friend and revered pastor. In the video we viewed together on Vision Weekend, John shared about Karl Barth summing up his Church Dogmatics quoting the children's hymn, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." The song continues, "Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but He is strong." We can use this last line, "We are weak, but He is strong" to create a handle on unpacking our story tonight. Let's consider our weakness and then let's ponder anew the strength of God, here in Christ. We are weak, but He is strong.

First, our weakness. I've heard it said that the most repeated command in all of Scripture is "Do not be afraid." The charge to take heart is so often repeated because it is so contrary to the patterns of the world under the curse of the fall. Our brokenness defaults instead to fear, anxiety and doubt, but Christ bids us to have faith, to trust, to fix our eyes not on the storms, but on His face and His Kingdom. To encourage you to this end I want to share a few of my favorite passages that fill me with courage and faith. First, Psalm 118:6: "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" When I was studying Hebrew this became a constant prayer (partly because it's quite basic Hebrew and partly because it's intensely rich theology). Exam coming up? Waking up from a nightmare? Not sure this life thing is going to work out? Time to pray: (Yah-weh lî; lô 'î-râ; Mah- ya-'ă-šeh lî 'ā-ām?). "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" And then there's Isaiah 41:10: "So 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." In Mark's gospel, Jesus simply says, "Don't be

afraid; just believe" (Mark 5:36). I heard a pastor say there's some 365 commands throughout Scripture to not fear, one for each day of most years; we'll have to find one more for later this month.

There is such a great battle going on in the spiritual realm for your heart. One side is fighting that your heart be filled with fear, the other side fighting that your heart be filled with faith. Throughout all Scripture, faith and fear retain the same relationship to one another through God's eyes; they are Kingdom opposites. This is why Paul writes in 2 Timothy 1:7, "the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." God gives His people faith, not fear. Faith and fear are Kingdom opposites. The children's song goes, "We are weak, but He is strong." We've considered our weakness and, really, we shouldn't spend too much time there because I think everyone of us, if we are honest, knows our own weakness. But what about the strength of the Lord, do you know about the strength of the Lord? Let's consider the strength of Christ in three ways: the strength of His ability, the strength of His Care, and the strength of His empowerment.

First, let's consider the strength of Christ's ability. Here in our text when I say "ability" I am referring to the awesome power and authority of Jesus. The disciples have yet to grasp the fullness of who is asleep in the boat that night, but they've seen Him heal disease, cause the lame to walk, and even forgive sin. They know enough already, by chapter 4 of Mark, about the uniqueness of Jesus that they do not think twice about calling out to Him for help. "Lord!" "Teacher!" "Master!" "Lord!" "Teacher!" "Master!" And then the most amazing thing happens; the disciples discover that this person even holds power and authority over the natural order. Later in Mark we read these words of Christ, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). When we reach the final verse of our text, we find the disciples have become even more afraid, but now instead of the stormy seas, the disciples fear the one who yields such jaw-dropping, awe-inspiring, worship-inducing power and authority. You see, later in Jesus' ministry, Jesus walks on the very water that tonight He commands to be still. And what started out as fear turns into worship: "Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33). Here we see the early stages of discipleship. Doubt becomes curiosity, curiosity becomes investigation, investigation becomes knowledge (there IS a holy God and I am at odds with Him!), and knowledge is transformed, by faith, into worship, into utmost adoration of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Paul writes in Colossians 1:15-20: The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers

or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Friends, tonight we worship the one who is Himself power and authority. But Christ is not just power and authority, least we all be smote back into ash on Ash Wednesday.

What joy I have to declare as clearly as I can: Christ did not come to smite, but to save! Christ is so, so loving, friends – Christ cares for you. Jesus’ earthly ministry was the most caring ministry the Church, indeed the world, has ever witnessed. This is why your ears and your heart should burn because of the level of irony in our text when the disciples wake Jesus up and cry out, “Don’t you care if we drown?!” O my word, friends, O my word. May your heart be open to this: we, all of us, shake our fists at God for whatever the situation and accuse Him of “not caring if we drown.” We become fixated on the problem in front of us; we take our eyes off of the author and perfecter of our faith; we turn our back on God; and when we turn back around we’ve exchanged our true identity for our false identity. We look Jesus in the eyes and say, “Don’t you care about me? Don’t you care about my relationship? Don’t you care about my ability to make ends meet? Don’t you care about my friend who is sick?”

O, church, we each of us have such important work each and every day to remind ourselves of the true words. You gotta circle up with your few close Christian friends and you gotta remind one another of the true words. God does care. He cares! “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45). That’s a true word. It’s a steadfast word. It’s a word to be reminded of in the morning when you rise, in the middle of the day when life is swirling, and in the evening when doubts come so easily. O, church, behold the care of Christ. The whole reason God was in the boat on that night was precisely to save, precisely to exchange the ashes of death with the beauty of life.

Life is on the table tonight and you are invited to make the best trade in the world. How do you make the trade? By fully placing yourself in Christ. A central theme of Ash Wednesday is the remembrance and celebration of our baptism, our being placed securely in Christ. In baptism one of the things we celebrate is this hiddenness in Christ. Later in worship this evening you will have the opportunity to remember and celebrate your baptism in a special way by dipping your hand in the baptismal font and placing

some of the water on your head. I encourage you to do this. Celebrate in a tangible way your salvation. Crashing waves, where is your power? Death, where is your sting? I’m safe and secure in the arms of Christ who does care and is able.

Remember the opening lines to the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

To live for him. To live for him! You see, Christ is able, Christ cares, and Christ empowers. Jesus’ ability-and-care culminate on the cross, bringing me and you eternal life as we trust fully in Him. And in that very space of salvation Jesus commissions us to go. Go and tell the world that Jesus is King! Go and tell the world that you don’t have to live in a perpetual state of fear and chaos! Go and tell the world that you can die to your fear and live by faith in the one who is before all and sustains all. In the beginning was the Word ... and in Him was life and that life is the light of the world.

We are facing our own fears tonight not by standing up to them in our own strength, but by burying ourselves in Christ and saying yes to the Spirit giving us His life and His strength. On that night Jesus calmed the sea, but on every night since the cross, Christ continues to trample down our death by His death on the cross; because He lives, we too shall live. This evening as we move into the time of the imposition of ashes, remember truly that without Christ we are all of us dust, we are ash. But friends, the good news of the gospel should also be on your heart this evening. In Christ, you are given beauty for ashes. In Christ, you are given life in exchange of death, hope in exchange of despair, mission in exchange of meaninglessness. Will you say yes to God’s desire to replace your ashes of fear with the beauty of faith? Do you say yes and amen that in Christ, God’s beauty replaces your ash?

The ability of Christ assures us that there is one who can calm the sea. The care of Christ moves Christ to save us from our sin. And the empowerment of Christ commissions us to live boldly for Him.

Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so, little ones to Him belong, they are weak, but He is strong.