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### in the Season after Pentecost

**Don't Be Afraid. Jesus is Near.**

Life can get pretty scary at times. Sometimes events arise in our personal lives or in our families or among our friends. Other times we face threats to our faith or our lives as Christians. When the times of our lives are frightening, it's easy to lose sight of Jesus. Worship today reminds us that the Lord is always with us even when we can't see him and he seems far away. It's a wonderful thing to know that our Savior God is always close by.

#### First Reading

**2 Kings 6:8-17**

*Elisha and his servant see the armies of the Lord.*

#### Second Reading

**2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**

*Despite many attacks, the Lord stood at Paul's side.*

#### Gospel

**Mark 6:45-56**

*Jesus walks on water to save his disciples.*

#### Sermon

**2 Kings 6:8-17**

Introduction: It's hard sometimes to be alone. I was always a little uncomfortable when my wife would head for Minnesota to visit her family. I wasn't scared or anything, but it was just unsettling to be alone in the house. I know she felt the same way when I would be off with Seminary Chorus on concert tours for 12 days—and I think sometimes she actually was scared. I think you know what I mean. The nurses wheel you into the surgery suite and they're chattering the whole time, but you feel pretty much alone. You're looking at the monthly bills and comparing them with your checkbook balance and the balance won't cover the bills—just like last month—and you don't see anyone around who can help. You're standing at the grave of your husband or wife—I don't have to say anything more about feeling alone.

The Bible tells us again and again that we are never alone. The Bible insists that God is always close by. Jesus said, **I am with you always to the end of the world.** The Lord said, **When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.** My dad taught me this hymn when I was a little boy: "This I believe, yea rather, of this I make my boast, that God is my dear Father, the friend who loves me most, and that whate'er betide me, my Savior is at hand, through stormy seas to guide me and bring me safe to land."

Easy to say, but sometimes hard to believe. We get sick and the prognosis isn't good and Jesus seems far away. Tragedies happen in our family or with our friends, and we wonder: Where was Jesus? The droughts get worse and the fires rage in the west. Our church shrinks while others grow, the morals of our nation sink into an outhouse pit, no one can figure out what to do with Covid, and politicians bicker instead of lead—and we wonder: Where is Jesus when we need him? It seems sometimes like we're passing through the waters alone.

The Gospel for today tells us about some followers of Jesus who felt exactly like that. They were in a little boat in the middle of a big lake and struggling against the wind and waves and they were scared. Jesus was there alright, but they couldn't see him and so they stayed scared. The First Reading tells about another believer in the same situation. He

looked out one morning and saw a massive force of horses and chariots ready to attack his city. He was terrified. God was absolutely there with an army of horses and chariots of fire, but the man couldn't see it and so he stayed terrified.

What those believers needed is what we need. We need someone to open our eyes so we can see that Jesus is actually here or there or wherever we need him to be. We need to be able to make our way through life, to face troubles and tragedies, and be able to say, **Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.** And so today we pray:

### **Lord, Open Our Eyes that We May See**

So here's the situation in Israel. The king of Aram is making war with the king of Israel and he's getting mighty frustrated. Every time he tries to set up a battle line, the Lord's prophet Elisha informs the king of Israel where the king of Aram is. Of course, God is doing the reconnaissance here. The king of Aram finds out where Elisha is and determines to capture him. **He sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city.** So Elisha's servant wakes up, walks outside, and guess what he sees? You got it. He's terrified. **Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?"**

So here's the situation in Galilee. Jesus sent the crowds away after he fed them—remember: five loaves and two fish—and told the disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee to meet him later. The wind was against them and they were fighting to make progress. All at once they looked out and saw ghost walking on the water. In those days people felt a ghost was a sure sign of death. They thought they were goners and they were terrified.

You might think that these believers, both Elisha's servant and the disciples, would have reacted with a little more courage. That servant knew what Elisha was up to. He knew about the reports Elisha was sending to the king of Israel. He could have seen the hand of God in all this. The disciples certainly knew what Jesus could do. They had witnessed one miracle after and the last one—the feeding of the 5,000—was absolutely spectacular. But they simply assumed: a real army and a real storm. They figured, What you see is what you get.

Isn't it true that we make the same assumptions pretty often? We listen to the doctor's prognosis, we stare at the checkbook, we hear about the bad accident, we analyze the church statistics, and we pay attention to Fox News and life seems pretty much out of control. Jesus must be on vacation! And if Jesus doesn't take vacations, then he must be busy with someone else. All at once life gets lonely and pretty soon life gets scary. For all the promises that the Lord makes about his presence with us, why do we sometimes feel that we're alone?

Hard to tell with Elisha's servant. Maybe he was young, maybe inexperienced. But maybe his problem was the same as the disciples. Mark explains their problem: **They had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.** They hadn't come to grips with Jesus. They followed, they listened, they learned, but it was all kind of on the surface. They saw Jesus but they didn't see behind him. They knew he came from God, but that he was God? That hadn't sunk in. They knew his mission was to help people, but that he would save people by dying? They knew he had power but that he had to kind of power to rise from a tomb after he was dead? That wasn't in their sights. And so it hadn't sunk in that Jesus was everywhere.

Sometimes we're short-sighted, too. Our troubles and challenges are very real, no doubt about it, but sometimes we don't see past them. We see the problems and we don't see that the solution is standing right next to us. We should know better for all we've seen in Jesus, but too often we let our sinful nature consume us and push faith away. We feel alone; we feel the pressure, we feel the fear. We get scared because we assume the obvious: What we see is what we get.

Elisha saw the problem. Elisha could see what his servant couldn't see. **Don't be afraid, he said. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.** I wonder what the servant's face looked like when he heard that. Something like, What in the world are you talking about. **And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.** I wonder what the servant's face looked like then? God was there right before his eyes.

No horses and chariots on the Sea of Galilee. The disciples were still grappling with seeing a ghost when they heard the voice of Jesus. **Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down.** No ghost, no wind, no drowning. Jesus was there right before their eyes.

**Lord, open our eyes that we may see.** The Lord hasn't promised that we will see the armies that fight for us every day. He hasn't promised that we will feel the touch of Jesus' hand or see the kindness in his eyes. But he has promised to give us faith that sees with absolute clarity the power of God and the love of Christ. He has promised that the gospel we hear and the baptism we remember and the body and blood we receive will give us a faith-sight that enables us to see Jesus as clearly as if he were sitting in our living room. St. Paul was in chains and facing execution. Many of his friends had forsaken him. But you heard him in the Second Reading for today: **The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength. He will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.** The Lord had opened Paul's eyes and he could see.

**Lord, open our eyes that we may see.** Take away our sins of doubt and discouragement. Forgive our faltering faith and our knee-shaking fears. Make our faith strong to believe that what we see is not what we get but that we get what your power and presence always give. Lead us to believe that you are with us every hour just as we believe that you died for us long ago. Help us to trust that you stay with us just as we trust that you forgive us. Help us to know that you live with us now just as we know that we will live with you forever. Open our eyes and make our faith strong to confess:

O Lord, I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Amen.