

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Exodus 14:10-31; St. Matthew 14:22-33

“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

Moses and the Israelites looked out at Red Sea. They looked back at Pharaoh’s approaching armies. There was no way out—no way they could see, at least. Terror filled their hearts so accustomed to terror. Here were their oppressors, their tormentors, their torturers, and they were bearing down on them with chariots capable of furious speed and swords capable of furious slaughter.

Their sojourn in Egypt had been long, and it had been bitter. As the pharaohs forgot the dutiful service of Joseph, their view of these shepherding bumpkins turned from warmth to indifference to hostility, from friend to foe.

Israel had no clue what was in store for them at the time, but hundreds of years of slavery, grueling slavery, relentless slavery, unmerciful slavery was thrust upon them. The Egyptians robbed them of their goods, stripped them of their pride, stole and murdered their children, bound their race and crushed their hopes. God’s promises began to sound more distant. God’s mighty acts from the past were gradually forgotten. The catechism fell by the wayside and preaching fell tragically silent.

But then God had acted. He’d heard their cries for mercy. He’d had enough of their suffering and reminded them that their fathers—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—were not only to be fathers by blood but also in faith. He assured them His promises never went unfulfilled. He called back an exiled murderer from hiding and set him before the Israelites as their prophet for life.

It took a while. Pharaoh’s heart was hard, and it only got harder. God’s Word—both His threats and His promises—can do that to people. Plague after plague, Pharaoh drew nearer to his destruction. With every warning, he only became more resolute in his defiance of the true God—be forewarned. But finally, when God took from Pharaoh what He would give for Israel and all the children of Abraham through faith—his son—Pharaoh caved. He let God’s people go.

How glorious it had been, walking out of Egypt and away from their slavery, having plundered the Egyptians, who willingly showered their former slaves with their riches, pleading with them to take it far from them, together and most importantly with God’s wrath as well! Finally, they were delivered. Finally, they were saved. That day would never be forgotten, they were sure, but sure isn’t always certain.

Moses and the Israelites looked out at Red Sea. They looked back at Pharaoh’s approaching armies. There was no way out—no way they could see, at least. They forgot. They wavered. They doubted. They even had the yellow-bellied gall to rebuke Moses, *“Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”*

They had taken their eyes off Christ. They’d forgotten the long promised Savior awaiting them in their very DNA. God would not forsake them. He needed them to live and pass down the promise until the Promised One came, so God could forsake that One on the cross—His own very Son—to forgive these ungrateful, forgetful, and stiff-necked sinners who stood, or so it seemed, precariously and with buckling knees between disembowelment and drowning. *“Take heart. Be not afraid. Stand firm,”* Moses told them, but it was easier said than done.

The disciples looked out at the sea. They were terrified. They cried out in fear. *“It is a ghost!”* they gasped.

It had been a glorious day, that day. They were tired from the sun and hungry. They were frightened that there might be a riot. The people had followed Jesus smack dab into the middle of

nowhere and had nothing to eat. “*You feed them,*” Jesus had told them. “*Yeah right,*” they’d thought, and in nicer words replied as much. But, sure enough, they’d done it. They’d fed them all—five thousand men and who knows how many women and children. They just kept passing out the bread and fish and the bread and fish just kept coming. That day would never be forgotten, they were sure, but sure isn’t always certain.

And so here they were, beaten by the wind, a rickety boat full of cowering cohorts. And there it was, some sort of sea monster, walking toward them—*walking toward them*—on the tumultuous sea. So they did what any reasonable person would do. They whimpered and trembled and did their best not to wet themselves. And then He said it, “*Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.*” Easier said than done, however and of course.

St. Peter thought he’d give playing Moses a shot. He was capable of great courage, you know, St. Peter was. Unfortunately, like the tale of a dog, his foot was usually close behind him, ready to be planted in his mouth. He was full, though, and had no intention of eating his words this time. He was going to trust God as he looked out upon the threatening sea. “*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*”

And Jesus said, “*Come.*” And St. Peter did, and it was awesome. He felt like he was on top of the world, like he could walk on water, and he was. And he was fine so long as he kept his eyes on Jesus. But he didn’t keep his eyes on Jesus. He saw the wind. He saw the Pharaoh on one side and the Red Sea on the other, so to speak, and he was afraid. Even as he’d drawn nearer to our Lord with each step, Jesus had somehow gotten smaller in his mind. Sure, Jesus had worked wonders in the past, but could St. Peter really be sure that He would do the same for him right here and right now.

Jesus said, “*Come,*” and implicit in His command was a promise, as implicit and certain as when He bids the penitent sinner, “*Believe.*” Jesus wasn’t going back on His Word, but St. Peter, unfortunately, also wasn’t keeping hold of it, and so he began to sink, and that’s when he did the smartest thing he’d done all day and, perhaps, in quite a while. “*Lord, save me,*” he cried.

What’s your Pharaoh and Egyptians? What’s your Red Sea? What’s your storm? What has made you doubt God’s promises, lose sight of Christ, and begin to sink? Sure, you know He’s kept His Word in the past, but have you started to wonder that He will continue to do so in the present, in the future? Sure, you’ve had your bold moments, but your foot, like a tale, hasn’t been far behind, has it, ready to be inserted in your mouth? And don’t think you can fool me. I know you’ve been in the boat with the disciples; I know you’ve walked into the wilderness with the Israelites. We all have. God’s people, for all their saint, still have plenty of sinner to wrestle with.

So be smart. Take heart. It is Jesus. Do not be afraid. Suck it up and breathe out a simple prayer that God has never been able to resist, “*Lord, save me.*”

As Moses lifted up his staff to part the waters of Red Sea and save his people, so Christ was lifted up on the cross to bring you through the waters of your Baptism to your salvation. That staff of Moses’ became quite the rallying point for the Israelites, didn’t it? Let the cross be the same for you. Wet with the waters of your adoption as God’s children, keep your eyes on Jesus, let Him grow, not smaller, but ever larger as you draw nearer, for He is the Almighty God, your Deliverer. And, processing it all after the fact, taking in all your God has done to rescue you, say all that is left for those brought from death to life in God’s hand to say: “*Truly you are the Son of God.*” Amen.