

Mark 6:45–56

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 24 July 2012

With one exception, the texts for this Sunday after Pentecost are all watery and wet, but with no exception, all of them are packed solid with promise. So we're going to have some fun. There's water overflowing in the lesson, the psalm, and the gospel. The lesson comes from the end of the flood narrative, where God promises to hang his bow in the sky and never again to destroy the creation with water. Even if the water is receding, there's plenty around, more than enough to keep a couple of birds in the air until one finally comes home with a leaf in its bill. The psalm is a wonderful song of thanksgiving for, among other things, God's creation of the waters. So here we go again. And in the gospel we have Jesus out on the Sea of Galilee, the Lake of Gennesaret, again, but this time he's walking on the water. How about that? More fun. So we've got water all over the place, and in each of these watery texts there's a promise.

And when we come to Ephesians, we get another ecstatic text, just full of promise, this time in the form of a prayer, a prayer for us. Luther used to say that these things go together, the Word and faith. The word of promise comes first, and it creates the faith that attends to it, that hears it, that clings to it, and it's that combination that is unfolding in these lessons. So we'll start with the supporting texts, as usual, and then work our way through the gospel, which is a lot of fun.

Genesis 9: The Bow in the Clouds

Genesis 9:8–17 marks a change in God's strategy for dealing with sinners. The flood didn't change much. If you compare Genesis 6:5 and Genesis 8:21, before the flood and after it, you get variations on a verse that says the imagination of man's heart is evil only continually, from his youth, in all the extensiveness and expansiveness of that passage. I suppose it's something of a problem that it uses the male pronoun, but clearly women are included in this as well.

The problem is that the heart has gone awry. It started in the garden with Adam and Eve, and it has continued to expand. It continued through the story of Cain and Abel, and then Lamech's song: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice: if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech

seventy-sevenfold.” It expands from there until we get to the story of the sons of God cohabiting with the daughters of men and fathering a race of giants in the earth. Ole Rølvaag’s Norwegians, undoubtedly, are the giants in the earth, representing the crossing of angels with human women so desirable that the angels couldn’t stay at home. So it’s a mess, and finally enough of a mess that the Lord decides he is going to destroy the whole thing. But for Noah, according to Genesis, the whole thing would have gone down. But God remembered Noah, and he preserved Noah.

So at the beginning of the story, looking over his creation, God despairs of human unrighteousness, evil only continually from youth. And in deciding to destroy the whole business, God preserves Noah, hoping to start over again. Now we come to the end of the flood narrative, and we’ve got the same verse repeated in 8:21, but this time God decides he is going to deal with it differently than before. Previously he has dealt with the creation by law: by threat, by restraint, by imposition. And of course the law has done what the law generally does among sinners. It has kicked up more unrighteousness, so that the whole blessed business is spoiled and spreading, and the whole creation is going to hell in a handbasket.

This time he hangs his bow in the heavens. I just love that picture. God’s bow, of course, is the rainbow, and he hangs it in the heavens. Just as a man who has used his bow puts it away when he is done with it, God hangs it in the heavens and leaves it hanging there as a sign to us that he will never again destroy the earth with water. He is done with the law alone. A new word joins it now, and it is a word of promise.

To be sure, we can hear echoes of this word when God speaks to Adam and Eve in the garden: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.” But here the promise comes right out into the open, as big as a rainbow, as beautiful as a rainbow. And that promise, out in the open, says that God is not going to deal with us simply by the forces of destruction. God is going to seek the heart, and he seeks the heart with his promise.

So this is just a gorgeous text, with all kinds of specifics in it. The commentaries all like to say this is mostly Priestly narrative, but I can hear echoes of the old Yahwist behind it. He is such a great theologian, and especially when you hear that verse about “evil only continually,” you know he has been around someplace. So we get a radical promise. We get God deciding he is going to start over with promise.

And it won't be long before, out of these first eleven chapters of Genesis with all their disasters, a small and minuscule parade begins in Ur of the Chaldees, in what is now Iraq. At the front of the parade will be none other than old Abraham and Sarah, aging, getting wizened, but now under promise, believing that God has called them and that his promise is for them. This is the beginning of the new creation: God's promise to Abraham. It begins here with Noah, and it becomes microcosmic, I suppose you could say, before it becomes macrocosmic. It goes to Abraham, and from there, as Paul says, to all the peoples of the earth. How about that?

So law is now being supplanted by promise, and if law remains, it remains hobbled by the promises of the gospel, so that the word of forgiveness becomes the last word. Of course, it is always important to be careful with the word "covenant," because in our situation covenant and contract are virtually synonymous. As soon as we start talking covenant, people say, "Well, God does his part, and I'd better do my part." Isn't that right? That's completely wrong. When God makes a covenant, it is what used to be called a suzerainty treaty. It is one-sided. He both establishes the promise and keeps it, and it works from there. So we're ready to go. This is a great story, and you can have a lot of fun with it.

Psalm 136: His Steadfast Love Endures Forever

Psalm 136:1-9 exposes the love that drives this promise. This is really fun. It is a liturgy, and the congregation's response is always the same: "for his steadfast love endures forever." There you go. That is the term of the covenant. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. This is *hesed*, the old Hebrew word. In Lutheran terms we could translate it unqualified love: unreserved self-giving, the overflowing munificence of God in which he pours himself out, "a glowing oven full of love," as Luther says, a horn of plenty pouring down blessing after blessing after blessing.

In Psalm 136 we get the gifts of creation being praised. After verse 9 it goes on to speak of the events in history carried out under the steadfast love of God. But here is the hymn of praise, waters included, of course, lest we think we're going to get away from this dry: "to him who spread out the earth above the waters."

I suppose that when we are suffering from drought, we should begin to think about all these watery stories. I was in Ohio last week for a meeting and went walking across the grass. It sounded like I was walking on shredded wheat, dry as a bone. And don't you suppose that, as a

good Oregonian, I came into Ohio and made it rain? People were practically running across their lawns with joy. But the corn was only as high as my knee. It should be higher than my head by now. So you get an idea. But God gives water. That is part of the promise: the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. And even under the sign of drought, water is never very far away. That's part of the fun.

Ephesians 3: A Prayer for Us

So we have two texts that work right together around the theme of water and promise. And then we've got Ephesians 3. How about this? The apostle Paul, or more likely one of his great students, is praying for us. We're going to see this in the gospel too: faith always exists under temptation. We are constantly exposed, and because we are constantly exposed, faith turns to God and calls out to him in prayer.

This is a great epistle. Even though it is linguistically a little different from Paul's writings, you can still hear the Pauline themes sounded magnificently. Sinners live under threat, and consequently God does not turn faith over to us as though it were some sort of project to achieve. Since our hearts are evil only continually from our youth, what chance do we have of making faith? Of course, if the old Adam starts trying to make faith, faith starts to look just like the old Adam. You can't distinguish it from despair or pride. It just jumps from one side of the horse to the other, crowing about how it believes and then falling off the horse into abject unbelief just as quickly. That's not faith in God; it's faith in ourselves, faith in our own possibilities. So God isn't going to give this job to us any more than he calls on us to create the resurrection of the dead. What kind of chance do you think we've got with that? About the same as we've got with making faith.

So the apostle Paul prays for us. This is magnificent. Here we have this great prayer, in which he prays that we will be held in true faith, that we will be deepened in understanding, that we will grow. It's just magnificent. My old friend Lee Griffin always used to say that the gospel is antithetical to every human tendency. And so we are attaching ourselves to a disputed sovereign. We are defined by the crucified one and the risen one, and so we are exposed, under threat, in jeopardy. In the midst of that we pray that God will continue to grant us faith. We pray for one another, that we will be given faith. We pray that we will grow in comprehension, that we will finally get it, finally catch on and be caught and held, that we will become so attached to this word that the Word and faith are bound together thick as thieves, so that faith is inseparable from the promise.

Mark 6: Take Heart, It Is I

Here we go. Now we have this wonderful gospel from Mark 6:45–56. It sounds a little like a variation on a text we had recently, the stilling of the storm, and it sets up the same way. Jesus is crossing back and forth across the lake, and as he crosses he is troubled by the crowd, the five thousand at the feeding. He is in a world of people and trying to get away, and so the disciples leave him alone on the shore and he goes to pray. He is finally going to get some solitude.

You can think of it. You know what it is like on Sunday morning and other times around the congregation, when people come at you one right after another and you can't find any peace. You know how wonderful it is just to be alone a little, to get away. Multiply that by being the Savior of the world. He is being beset and besought and grabbed and pulled and pushed and pummeled, and he wants just a little quiet time, just a little rest. You don't have to be an INTJ to go looking for that. That's just normal human behavior.

And so the disciples take off without him, and now we fall back into the same routine we ran into in the stilling of the storm. They get out there on that lake, and it's storming. This is pretty much the normal situation. As I told you a couple of weeks ago, the Sea of Galilee funnels the wind right straight down it. I got into an argument with my wife about that; she said it wasn't as much of a slot as I remembered. But she did acknowledge that the wind blows there, and since that is biblically attested, I'm glad she finally agreed. When the wind comes up, it kicks up a storm lickety-split, and that lake can go from flat calm to a cauldron in a matter of minutes. So the disciples are described in our gospel as straining at the oars for all they're worth. They are caught in a storm and rowing like mad, trying to make progress against it.

This is normal for the lake, but it is also normal for faith. Faith lives in stormy country. Luther used to say that faith is like a magnet: it draws its opposite, namely unbelief. Rather than resolving all conflict, faith seems to bring further conflict. Over and over again we see Jesus in turmoil, and we find the disciples in turmoil.

I remember when I was a student at Luther myself, taking a seminar from Gerhard Forde. There was a Baptist in the class, and Gerhard gave a wonderful lecture on the theology of the cross. The Baptist student said, "Well, what happens if you don't have any pain?" Gerhard looked at him and said, "Take your pulse." This is par for the course. We live in turmoil. If it

doesn't happen in your family, you can get it at work. If it doesn't happen at work, just wait for the annual meeting. If it doesn't happen there, go to a church conference of some kind, or watch the political news. There is conflict, plenty of conflict. That is the normal situation, and in the life of faith, faith always has this exposure. It is always being tested and caught up in these kinds of situations.

So the disciples are on the lake, a storm comes up, and they are rowing to beat the band, trying to make some progress against the waves. And as they are rowing as hard as they can, they look up, and lo and behold, who should come walking by on the waves but Jesus. Of course, that makes all the sense in the world, right? They are in a storm, the waves are coming over the top of the boat, they are rowing like mad, and they look up and there comes Jesus walking across the water. One of them says to another, "Is that him?" And the other says, "I thought we left him behind. What's he doing out here?" And another says, "Good Lord, that is him. He's walking on the water. Come on." They are just overwhelmed by the sight.

Now we should notice what happens when the disciples see him, because this is really fun, and pertinent to the point of being impertinent. They see him, and they think, "Oh, our problems are solved." They see Jesus, and all of a sudden they are confident. They have been like anybody else in a storm. They've been watching the waves, and as they watched, the waves got bigger and bigger, probably because the wind was driving them, but also in their own minds. All they can see now is those blame waves. All of a sudden they see Jesus and say, "Holy smokes, our problems are solved. It's all done."

But then they look a little closer, and when they do, it seems he is going by. "He meant to pass by them." He is on his way someplace else. This is really interesting. You could ask where they think he is going. To some sort of shopping center? To buy some smokes? What's he doing out there, going someplace else? It's ridiculous.

But faith works in an entirely different way. Because faith lives in the midst of temptation, when it sees Jesus, the temptation multiplies. It gets worse, and faith thinks, "Oh, he's going someplace else." It doesn't make sense that he would be out there on the water and go someplace else. But faith loses track of itself, and when it loses track of Jesus, it starts looking at itself. It says, "Oh no, we're going down for sure. Now he's going someplace else."

It is in the very nature of faith that it lives in the midst of this temptation. Jesus, rather than being the solution to the problem of temptation, is often enough the source of temptation. At

points he appears to be our adversary. Sheldon Tostengard and I always joked about founding a new congregation called Biting Savior Lutheran Church. Sometimes Jesus is as much the problem as the solution. First he wants to remain on shore, and then they are out there fighting that storm, and here he comes, walking. When they see him walking, they think, “Holy smokes, we’re saved, all of us.” And then it looks as if he is going right by them.

What sinner hasn’t wondered? He forgives sins, but does he forgive mine? He died for the sins of the world, but if he knew my sins, he’d gag. As sinners we always wonder whether Jesus is really for us, whether he is the one for us and how deeply he is for us. Because we live in the midst of temptation, and living in temptation, we can imagine an alternative. Our hearts are evil only continually from our youth. And so even when we see Jesus coming, we say, “He can’t be. He’s going someplace else. He loves others, but not a jerk like me.” Good Lord. Just the fact of repentance itself makes us wonder whether we are qualified and whether his promises are good for us.

I think it is true, as Luther said, that he can’t be your Savior until he has become your enemy. When you see him coming against you, then you know what it is for him to be for you, because he is both. He is against you, putting you to death as a sinner, and he is for you, raising you up to newness of life. And now you can’t tell the difference, because it’s dark and stormy, and those waves are coming over the top of the boat, and even though you’re rowing as hard as you can, it doesn’t seem as if you’re making any progress at all. What is he up to now? Of course we should ask.

And now it is very, very important that you watch what Jesus does with this. This is so much fun. It is just exactly like him. He knows the disciples are panicked. They are overwhelmed with fear. And so he says, “Take heart; it is I.”

Take heart, it is I. Well, you know, those can be the cheapest words in the whole human vocabulary. It all depends on who says them. “Take heart, it’s me” might be a reason to pick up and run. But they know his voice. And when they know his voice and hear him say, “Take heart; it is I,” they know good things are going to follow. They can be confident.

So they have been calling out to him for all they’re worth, and he answers. This is faith: it calls out to Jesus. “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you.” As Luther explains in his explanation of the First Commandment, faith is this: that we call out to God expecting good things. And so the disciples are rowing desperately, and they see him coming near but maybe

going someplace else, and they don't surrender. They call to him for all they're worth: "Hey, hey, we're over here! Come on, come on!" That's true prayer. That's true faith. That's faith itself. Faith calls out to Jesus and says, "Oh, I need you, baby. Come on." Faith calls out to Jesus and says, "Help me, help me, help me."

And Jesus answers, "Take heart; it is I." Isn't that great? Here the disciples are scared to death, worried about their laundry bill, wondering what in the world is going to become of them. They call out to him desperately, and he says, "Take heart; it is I." Well, you say that to people in all kinds of trouble: Take heart, it's him. Take heart, it's him. This is his answer.

But if this were all there was to his answer, we'd be right back in the same boat. Remember, our hearts are evil only continually from our youth. And because they are, we can hear him say, "Take heart; it is I," and think to ourselves, "Sure. And the boat's going down," or, "The storm is never going to end," or, "He's going someplace else." We hear the word, and we hear the word, and we hear the word, and we wonder, "Well, what about me?"

I remember one time several years ago, a friend of mine, one of my closest friends, called me from Tanzania and asked me to take care of his daughter. She had a cancerous brain tumor, and he said, "I can't come home. I want you to be her dad for me." Well, you do things for friends, but I thought that was a little much. So I went to call on her, and we laid hands on her and prayed. We called out to Jesus, expecting good. And lo and behold, I talked to her the other day. Her own daughter was getting married, and she called me up just to give thanks that Christ Jesus had healed her and she could go to her daughter's wedding. Talk about a miracle. It's one of the great things I ever saw.

But I'll tell you this: I've called on a lot of people who were dying of cancer, and there was no healing. In fact, it got worse. And so we say to ourselves, "All right, I heard you say, 'Take heart, it is I,' but I'm losing heart, because I'm getting worse. What's the deal on this?"

Now here is the difference. This is what makes this word, "Take heart; it is I," a word of gospel. If it were just "Take heart; it is I," it could be the most terrible word of law you can imagine. "I'm losing heart. I'm drowning. This damn boat is on its way to the bottom. Come on, come on." But here is the difference. Jesus says, "Take heart; it is I," and he is swinging a leg over the gunwale and crawling into that boat with them. Can you imagine? There we go. Remember when we talked about the stilling of the storm? Sometimes, even when Jesus is in the boat, you can have big trouble. But this time he says, "Take heart; it is I," and when he says

it, he throws a leg over the edge of that boat and crawls in beside them. And what happens then? Flat calm. He's in the boat.

You see, this is the difference between the law and the gospel. The law says, "Take heart; it is I," and then, in a subtle subtext, "Now it's up to you." But in the gospel, Jesus not only says, "Take heart; it is I," he crawls into the boat with these men. And when he is in the boat with them, all right, now we can move. All of a sudden it's calm again, and we can begin.

This is how it works in faith. In faith we live in constant temptation. We are sinners, and because we are sinners we are exposed. We are out in the open, where there are storms. You get up in the morning, and the first thing you hear about is all those dead in Aurora, Colorado, all those people in the theater. You get up the next morning and discover that it was a Lutheran boy from down in San Diego who did it. Sometimes it just never ends: trouble, trouble, trouble. My wife, Carolyn, and I have been praying for that family, the family of the young man who perpetrated these murders. We've been praying for them every day, and for him every day, and for the victims every day. But I'm a little tired of victims, and I'm a little tired of hearing about these shootings, and I'm a little tired of the fact that the gun industry has turned the country into an armed camp. Come on, come on. There's too much trouble.

And if you start there, you start thinking about your family, or about work, or about the church. I'm telling you, the Sea of Galilee looks fairly calm compared with the turbulence most of us live with. And in this turbulence, what alternative do we have? We have no alternatives but one. We are brought to it; we don't choose it. And what we are brought to is calling out to Jesus and saying, "You're going to have to handle this. I can't."

"Take heart; it is I." When we call out to him, he doesn't abandon us. He comes to us in his word to assure us. And what happens to that word in his speaking is that it is incarnated. As it enters your ear, it sprouts hands. As it enters your ear, it grows legs. As it enters your ear, it spreads an arm across your shoulder. As it enters your ear, it lifts and carries; it picks you up so that you can go. He is crawling into the boat with you: your boat, that leaky old boat you bought at a garage sale and meant to patch, which is going down. Into that leaky old boat he crawls in beside you. And so, in the trouble, all of a sudden there is calm. Not one or the other, not simply trouble and not simply calm, but in the trouble, calm. Both, both.

"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." I've flattened that damn lake, and I'm going to bring these fellows home; they're tired. There you

go. Full of promise.

So this little story is more fun, and preaching it is a lot of fun too, because there's no trouble finding turbulence in the water. Turbulence finds you. But you are sent as the preacher to say, "Take heart; it's him." And you are called as the preacher to crawl over the edge of the boat beside them, grab an oar, and see where you can go. As long as he is in the boat, you can go a long way. Maybe there's going to be an island out there. You can have fish and chips, the way he did after he was raised from the dead.

It goes together. No cross without a resurrection, no resurrection without a cross. They are tied together, and already here in Mark 6 we can see it coming. The crucified one is the risen one; the risen one is the crucified one, side by side. "Take heart; it is I." I'm home, dear. The best news possible.

So there you go. You've got texts now that you can play with. What I recommend with this gospel, if you're going to preach it, is that you play, and play a lot, because this is such a wonderful story and you can enjoy it no end. God's peace to each of you. We'll talk live in a couple of weeks.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 24 July 2012 (about 41 minutes).

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzFbqQtGd3Q>

Edited from the recording for reading.