

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, 7-25-2021

Well, David was getting old. He was king. He had power and wealth and status, and you would think, pretty much everything he needed including plenty of wives. But now it's the time of year when kings go to war, and he just doesn't feel up to it. He sends the armies out, but he's feeling old. He's no longer the powerful warrior he once was. And you can imagine him here, in his old age, being afraid of what lies ahead. Who is he now that he's old? How can he prove that he's still someone to be respected and feared? He's at the top of the heap, but will that last? What's he worth now?

And here, in the midst of his questions and his aging process, he sees a beautiful woman. He wants her, he takes her, and he gets her pregnant. And he's afraid again. Now, what does he do? He's got a problem. He tries a cover up, but his cover up doesn't work. And so, he takes desperate measures. And we'll hear the continuation of this story next week. But it all begins with David's self-questioning, his fear, his doubt.

The disciples are afraid too. Jesus puts Phillip on the spot, and he's very much like that student in class who just doesn't know the answer and is afraid about how he's going to come across. Andrew's trying hard, too: *Well, we have a little bit here, but I still don't see how this all computes. How can they feed all these people?*

So much need and so few resources -- only five loaves and two fish. It's an overwhelming situation. They don't know what to do, they're afraid and helpless.

Jesus solves their problem with a miracle. But even after he feeds the crowd, they are soon afraid again. Out in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, completely overwhelmed, and there's somebody coming toward them on the water. There is so much fear in all these lessons.

Just shortly before I left on vacation, one of the local churches had put out a sign board that said, *"Don't make me come down there. God."* Every time I went by, I found myself just shaking my head at the image of God that it portrays. God as punishing parent coming down with paddle in hand to deal with those troublesome children; a God who doesn't want to have to come down and be with the kids except to discipline them. It

portrays God as a figure to be feared. It puts out a picture of a religion based on fear. You better be careful. You better watch out. Don't make God come down here.

It's the opposite of the God portrayed in today's readings, because the God portrayed in today's readings comes to people in fear and says, *It is I. Do not be afraid. It is I.* This is the God who *chooses* to come to us, who *wants* to come to us, who is *with* us, who comes in love to comfort and help.

The truth is we can relate to the characters in today's readings because we are so often afraid. We so often feel that we need to prove ourselves, that we need to prove our worth. We need to prove that we're capable, that we're good at something. As we age, we must prove that we're still valid human beings who have something to offer. We need to prove that we deserve to be loved.

That's where so many of us live so much of the time. But in the face of our fear, in the face of our failures, in the face of our sins, God comes to us saying, *It is I. Do not be afraid.*

The author of the Letter to Ephesians writes, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the Saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

I love that phrase, *to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge*. Contradiction right there -- to know what cannot be known, to know what is beyond knowing -- because this isn't about some kind of head knowing or about some kind of intellectual grasp, that God is love. Instead, it is the kind of knowing that comes by experience, this beautiful image of being rooted and grounded.

We know the love of God, the love of Christ as we sink our roots deep into it, as we steep ourselves in that love. Soak it in. Allow it to nourish and feed us, to be our very life.

This is what the Letter to the Ephesians wants us to know. The love of Christ, that is our deepest reality, the reality in which we live and move and have our being. Time and

again, as we sink our roots deep, we discover God's mercy and grace and forgiveness and strength. When we are afraid, when we mess up as royally as David did, God is still love. God is *a/ways* love. That is who God is.

And so, with the Letter to Ephesians, I pray for you and for me that we may know in our very bones this love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, and so be filled with the fullness of God. Because when we know love, when we steep in God's love, we are transformed by it. And God is love. And God loves you. Every single one of you. God doesn't have to come down. God is already with us. In love.

Amen.