

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Ash Wednesday – February 25th, 2009

Mark 14:48-52

⁴⁸“Am I leading a rebellion,” said Jesus, “that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? ⁴⁹Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.” ⁵⁰Then everyone deserted him and fled.

⁵¹A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, ⁵²he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

Dear Followers of our Lord and Savior,

“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Mt 26:35). “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Mt 26:33). “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death” (Lk 22:33). If ever words came back to haunt people, and haunt them quickly, these were the words. Had it only been a few hours earlier that they had spoken them, in that warm, safe upper room in a house in Jerusalem? And now Jesus’ disciples were running in every direction, running for their lives, while the man they had promised to stand beside was bound and led away to judgment and death.

The sad fact about courage is that, all too often, we feel it most when we need it the least and feel it the least when we so desperately need it the most. Before the catastrophe in Gethsemane, the disciples had known what they were supposed to do when the time came. Stand with Christ! Stand up, stand up for Jesus! Never leave him or forsake him! But in that dark and shadowy garden, where God alone knew how many soldiers there were with torches and swords and clubs everywhere, the courage that the disciples had all so strongly felt in themselves at suppertime melted away. And why did their courage flee? It was because trust was abandoned. That was why the disciples ran in the garden. They no longer had faith in Jesus. That was gone. The man had once walked across water to rescue them and had rebuked a gale-force wind when it had frightened them. But now they feared that if they would stay with him, they would be doomed.

Doom doesn’t threaten us too often. And yet, like the disciples on that sad Thursday night so long ago, we sometimes find ourselves tempted to run away from wherever it is that Christ, our Lord, wants us to stand. And, to our sorrow and shame, we run away for the same reason. And that is when we must pray:

Theme: Forgive Our Fearful Lack of Trust!

- 1. We abandon you when our faith is weakest**
- 2. Father, increase our faith**

The disciples had never thought of themselves as cowards. Nor had they considered themselves to be braggarts or blowhards. They really loved Jesus, and they really wanted to be his loyal followers. When they had said those things about staying with him through thick and thin, they had meant them—every word!

How soon the disciples’ boasting changed to fear and flight! The most festive night of the year, the Passover, steadily became a nightmare from the moment the meal had been set out. They had seen Jesus’ sorrow even during the supper and had heard him once again speaking of his rejection and betrayal and death. They had walked through a darkness that seemed deeper than just the night and had reached the olive grove called Gethsemane. Worn out by sorrow and worry, they fell asleep while Jesus prayed and after he had asked them to keep watch with him. Dumbfounded, they watched as one of their own number betrayed Jesus to his enemies. Confused and frightened, they then ran to hide while their Lord was bound and led away to trial.

Jesus had foreseen it. Again and again during his time with the disciples, he had rebuked them for the

weakness of their faith. When storms would threaten them at sea and they would cry out in despair, he would ask them where their trust in him had gone. When some insurmountable trouble would come up—a huge crowd and no food to feed them, a disease they could not heal even with the authority and power Jesus had given them—he would wonder why they had lost their faith in him. Finally, at one time he had sighed, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Lk 18:8).

Just hours earlier, he had reminded them of a prophecy: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (Mk 14:27). One would betray him; another would deny him; all the others, as he put it, would “fall away on account of me” (Mt 26:31). None of them had believed these things would happen. All of them had protested. And now these things were coming horribly true.

It was their confusion that led them to abandon the faith they had once had in Jesus. Jesus had told them exactly what was going to happen; he had been telling them for months. And he had taught them again and again what he was here to do: to give his life for the sins of all people. When they—some of them, anyway—had first met Jesus, John the Baptist had told them clearly, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29).

Yet somehow they still harbored ideas of an earthly king and of glory and honor in this world. All the old legends and hopes about the splendors of the days of the Messiah still knocked about in their heads. Even as they trembled in the chill night air on the Mount of Olives, deep down it was still there in them.

And when Jesus wouldn’t lift a finger to stop the temple guards from arresting him, all the air went out of the balloon for the disciples. What was Jesus doing? Why wouldn’t he fight? Why didn’t he summon those 12 legions of angels to defend himself from his bloodthirsty enemies? The disciples didn’t know. They were scared. They lost all their hope that Jesus would make things turn out right in the end. And with their faith in him shattered, they ran in fear.

It is the same lack of trust that so often results in our abandonment of our Lord as well. Like the disciples, we find courage is easier to come up with when we don’t really need it. What grand and successful struggles against temptation we can weave in our dreams and imaginations! Satan may cajole and wheedle us, the sinful world may sing its siren song, but we know that we will stand fast. We won’t give in. We will fight the good fight of faith—we will!

And yet we know how, when push comes to shove, all our resolve can fail. It’s easy here, in church, to make the promises of everlasting loyalty to Christ. It is easy during our nighttime prayers in the solitude of our bedrooms to pledge undying devotion to our Savior and our King. But get out from behind these walls; get out of your house; be forced to deal with that world of sin and temptation and see what happens!

And our fears are so much less than those of the disciples. They abandoned Jesus to save their lives. The stakes are never that high for us, are they? We abandon his commands so that we won’t be laughed at or thought of less highly, or so that we won’t miss out on something that we feel would be very enjoyable. We know what his commandments say and the price of loyalty to him, but we fail him.

And it is the same sad story: Our lack of trust leads to our foolish fear and falling. We don’t think he is leading us to a place that is safe and good for us. Instead of trusting that our Good Shepherd knows where he is leading us, we fear that he has taken a wrong turn. We fear that he is leading us into some place we don’t want to be. It looks like it may be dark there. It looks like it may not be pleasant. It looks as if he doesn’t know what he’s doing. And so we run from him, driven by foolish fears that often hardly merit a shiver! Our trust in him melts away, and with it dissolves all our resolve to be his true and obedient followers. We abandon him, as surely as the disciples did, when our faith and trust in him grow weak.

2. Father, increase our faith.

And that is why every Christian, every day, needs to pray these words: “Father, increase our faith!” When our trust in our Savior is at its lowest ebb, that is when our prayers must rise to their highest pitch and fervor. God forbid that we should run away from him because our faith has grown weak! He has certainly done nothing to deserve such lack of confidence from us.

“Lord Jesus,” we must pray, “teach us once again the wisdom of your commandments and your leading.” This is why we study the commandments, so not only will we know what is expected of us but we also might marvel again at the understanding and insight of him who wrote them. If we would just do that, study and think through the ways he would have us go, how quickly we could put to rest our foolish fears! He knows what he is doing. Our Creator certainly knows the best paths on which to lead us. We truly have nothing to fear. We should always be able to say with the psalmist, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Ps 23:4).

That is why we study the stories in the Bible, so we might see again and again how true it is that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Ro 8:28). Let us read again and again the examples of how faith in God’s guidance has never been a mistake. Remember Moses and the people of Israel—seemingly trapped between the Egyptians and the Red Sea, murmuring about the hopeless place to which they had been led—until Moses told them, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today” (Ex 14:13). Remember the calming voice of the Savior as he walked through the tumultuous Sea of Galilee and told his disciples, “It is I; don’t be afraid” (Jn 6:20). He has never let down anyone who has faith in him: “The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame” (Ro 9:33).

That is why we remain constant in his Word and faithful to the sacraments by which he increases our faith and, consequently, decreases our fears. Do you fear sometimes that he may lead you to a dark and bad place and leave you in the lurch? Then remember your baptism, the day he claimed you through the washing of water with the Word and told all the world, “I have cleansed him; he is mine. I will never leave him or forsake him.” Do you fear that Jesus may not always have your best interests at heart as he leads you on a sometimes confusing and frightening path? Then come to his table. As you eat that bread and drink that wine, remember the dark road he traveled alone so that he could purchase your forgiveness with the sacrifice of his body and his blood.

“Lord,” we must pray, “help us trust your wisdom in all things, even if actual dangers should come from our following where your Son leads us.” The Christian life is not a cakewalk; God has made it abundantly clear to us that troubles will plague us if we follow his guidance. We walk in danger all the way, as the hymn puts it. But it was his wisdom that mapped out the route of our salvation through a path that was filled with pain and fear. He will never lead us into any place where his Son has not already been and has not already conquered all that we might fear. Jesus assures us, “Take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

And so, cleansed from our guilt by his blood, we can dedicate ourselves, body and soul, to living out the trust that he so rightly has earned from us. Let us never fear that he doesn’t know what is best for us when he points out the way for us to follow him. Let us never think that we each are better suited to figure out the best path for our lives, but let us always rely on our Savior to know and show it to us.

And, finally, let us follow those better examples that the disciples gave later in their lives. Remember Jesus’ final words to Peter: “I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!” (Jn 21:18,19).

And Peter followed, and the other apostles followed, through danger and fear, but this time unafraid, trusting in the Lord they had once abandoned in fear and doubt. God grant that we, who too often have followed the bad example, may receive God’s grace to follow the good. We won’t end now with great and eloquent promises of lifelong faithfulness. Such pride went before the disciples’ downfall in the Garden of Gethsemane. No, we will end with the fervent prayer that, for Jesus our Savior’s sake, our heavenly Father might give us an ever greater measure of his Holy Spirit. May he increase our faith and, with it, our courage. “Lord God, when we face our crises in our Gethsemanes, make us stand firm. Amen.”