IT IS I; DON’T BE AFRAID

John 6:16-24

Key Verse 6:20 “But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid.”

 On Feb 21, 2018 the ‘American Pastor’, Reverend Dr. Billy Graham passed away at the age of 99. Dr. Graham preached the gospel to more people than anyone else on earth. For six decades he preached to more than 2.5 billion people in 132 countries in churches, parks, stadiums, on television, and on the radio. He also became a pastor, adviser, and friend to 12 American presidents in a row, from Harry Truman to Barak Obama. He was regarded as one of the most respected and influential men of the 20th century, along with Martin Luther King Jr. and Pope John Paul II. His sermon was simple and powerful, and full of gospel messages about salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Wherever he visited, he preached Jesus’ death, resurrection, and his second coming. Once an English reporter challenged him, saying, “Why has your message been the same all the time? Don’t you have any other message to preach about?” Billy Graham answered, “I have no message to preach but Jesus and him crucified.” (1 Co 2:2) The servant who had been faithful to the Lord went to heaven to be with our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that God may bless America and raise many preachers, Bible teachers, and pastors like Billy Graham in this generation. Amen!

 In today’s passage Jesus walks on the water. This is Jesus’ fifth miraculous sign written in the gospel of John. This event is also written in Matthew’s gospel 14:22-34 and in Mark’s gospel 6:45-56. This event is paralleled to the event in which Jesus calms the storm. These two events teach us the same message - that Jesus is the Lord of creation and the ruler of nature. Let us think more about the meaning of his supernatural action and our attitude toward storms of life. Look at verses 16-21. “***When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat walking on the water; and they were frightened. But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid.” Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.***” We learn a few things from these verses.

First, Jesus’ disciples met storms whether Jesus was with them or not. After feeding 5,000 people, Jesus sent his disciples to the other side of the lake so that he could go up to a mountain to pray. (Mt 14:23) His disciples, who were free from the demanding crowd, must have been excited for a short break while they were rowing the boat to the other side of the lake. Peter might have sung a song, “Row, row, row your boat” like Luciano Pavarotti. At the same time, they felt uncomfortable because Jesus was not with them. While they were in the middle of the lake, they met a sudden storm. A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. According to Matthew’s gospel, the boat was buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. (Mt 14:24). Mark’s gospel says that they were straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. (Mk 6:48) They were stuck in the middle of the lake in the middle of the night. Some of them were veteran fishermen, but they were helpless before the strong wind and waves. They met a storm when Jesus was not with them. They also met storms when Jesus was with them. They met storms regardless of Jesus’ presence or absence. Here we learn that Jesus’ presence does not guarantee us exemption from the storms of life. Whether Jesus is with us or not, storms come. As God gives sunlight equally to the righteous and to the evil, so he also gives storms to the believers and the unbelievers. What really matters with us is not the storm itself, but our attitude toward storms and suffering. God strengthens us and our faith through storms. God also provides us with the way to overcome storms. Peter said in 1 Peter 4:12, “*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed*.” Peter encouraged the suffering believers to have positive attitudes toward suffering with Christ. Paul also in Romans 5:3-4 teaches us what kind of attitudes toward suffering we must have, “*Not only so, but also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; character, hope.*”

We expect to live a life without storms while we are sailing to Heaven. But we often meet storms, receive challenges from everywhere, suffer every day, and go through all kind of difficulties and problems which attack us like storms. We feel that all things come against us and that we are stuck in the middle, surrounded by problems. We wonder if God is with us or if God cares for us. Someone may ask, “God, where are you when I am suffering alone?”

 Second, yes Jesus cares for us! Mark 6:48 says that Jesus saw the disciples straining at the oars. Jesus went alone up to a mountain to pray. While he was praying, he saw that his disciples were struggling with the wind. It was a dark night. The disciples were in the middle of the lake, 3 or 4 miles away from land. It was impossible for anyone to physically see what was happening in the middle of the lake at night. But Jesus saw them. No matter how dark a situation we may be in and no matter how far we may be away from the Lord, God can see us, find us, and help us. Jesus is like a mother who always watches over her children who are playing near the water. Her eyes always follow her children even while she is doing something else. As soon as she sees that her children are in trouble in the water, she yells and jumps into the water to take her children out to safety. Jesus did not jump into the water to rescue his disciples, but instead he walked on the water!

 Jesus cares for us. He does not leave us alone - he is always with us. When he prays to God the Father, he closes one eye to see God the Father and opens the other eye to watch over us. Some students struggle with their tough school studies. They feel like they are helpless before raging waters. Others become anxious and fearful about their uncertain future. “What can I do with my major?” “How can I find a job after graduation?” Still, others may be stuck in the middle of obstacles. All things may seem to go against them. But, do not worry or become anxious. Jesus will care for you. He will come to you and help you. A pastor said, “Every answer to every problem is found in Jesus.” Jesus knows when we are struggling with storms. He knows how we can get through the storms. Peter was one of those in the boat that night. He experienced Jesus’ care in the stormy night. So he said in 1 Peter 5:7 says, *“Cast all our anxiety on him because he cares for you*.”

Third, we must hear Jesus’ voice. Jesus said in John 5:24, “*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged, but has crossed over from death to life.*” Jesus’ disciples were in danger of drowning. Suddenly, fear of death overpowered them. Their experiences and skills as veteran fishermen did not work. The wind blew stronger and the water grew rough. It was in the middle of the lake and the middle of the night. There seemed to be no way out for them. While they were struggling with the wind, they saw someone approaching their boat, walking on the water. According to Matthew and Mark’s gospel, they thought that it was a ghost. Who could walk on the water at night, but a ghost? They became even more terrified, thinking that they would be eaten by the ghost even before they were drowned.

 At that moment, Jesus said to them, “*It is I; don’t be afraid*.” Let us read verse 20. “***But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid***.” Jesus said, “I am not a ghost, but Jesus, your Master and Savior.” When there is no light on the dark sea, this is the time for us to hear Jesus’ voice. When there seems to be no way out from storms and no hope for the future, this is the time for us to remember Jesus’ words. “*It is I; don’t be afraid*.” Those who heard the voice of Jesus were saved. Those who heard the words of Jesus were healed. Those who hear the word of Jesus have eternal life and have crossed over from death to life. One young man in India attempted to commit suicide by drinking poison. This was because he felt that the suffering of his life was too heavy for him to bear. He was found unconscious by his aunt and carried to the emergency room. After waking up from the coma, he heard the word of God from the Bible, John 14:6 and 14:19, “*Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*.” (Jn 14:6), “…*Because I live, you also will live*.” When he heard Jesus’ words, he was born again. He received eternal life and crossed over from death to life. When we are in despair, depression, anxiety, fear, loneliness, it is time to hear Jesus’ words. “*It is I; don’t be afraid*.”

Fourth, Jesus is the Lord of creation and the ruler of nature. Who can walk on the water but God alone? Who can establish the law of nature in heaven, on the earth, and in the water, but God alone? The fact that Jesus walked on the water indicates that Jesus is the Lord of creation and the ruler of nature. He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God Almighty. The purpose of writing John’s gospel and inserting this miraculous sign in this book was to make people believe that Jesus is the Son of God so that they might have eternal life through faith in him. (Jn 20:31) Who could change water into wine but God alone? Who could heal a boy from a deadly disease but God alone? Who could heal the invalid man who had been so for 38 years, and who could feed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two small fish, but God alone? Who could rise from the dead and ascend into heaven but God alone? Jesus can change the laws of nature and rearrange the order of the universe for his good purposes. Jesus exercises his power and authority to reveal God’s glory. Jesus performs miracles to save his people and to lead them to the One who sent him. According to Matthew 14:33, his disciples worshiped Jesus, saying, “*Truly you are the Son of God.*”

Look at verse 21 again. “***Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading***.” Some scholars said that this was still another miracle that Jesus performed. As soon as Jesus got into the boat, the boat reached the shore right away. When the disciples welcomed Jesus in their boat, they reached the shore right away. When we welcome Jesus and invite him into our life, we may achieve our goals quickly. We experience one blessing after another.

 What is the most important and meaningful thing in a person’s life? People may answer many things, but I personally believe that it is the moment when we meet Jesus personally. It is the hour of conversion into new creation through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is our time of meeting God personally. In the Bible most of the great people of God met God in their time of suffering or in the middle of a storm. Abraham experienced God’s presence when he had a significant family problem. Jacob also met God at the Jabbok River while he was alone with his fear and anxiety. Joseph’s life was one tragedy after another. But the Lord was with him whenever he was in trouble. David was born again after he made a big mistake and committed sin before God. Peter the Apostle met Jesus personally when he had caught no fish and despaired of his empty net. He heard Jesus’ words, “*Don’t be afraid! From now on you will fish for people.*” (Lk 5:10) Matthew also met Jesus when he was in deep despair and was suffering from loneliness and fear. He heard Jesus’ words, *“Follow me*!” (Mt 9:9) Paul the Apostle also met Jesus on the way to Damascus while he was in trouble with his hatred, anger, and pride. Indeed, all of them met God while they were in storms of life. Christianity is the religion of both suffering and glory. Suffering is the prerequisite of glory. Paul said in Romans 8:18, “*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*” Christ Jesus also suffered and died for our sins. But he rose again from the dead and conquered death. Storms are not always bad. Through suffering from the storms we meet God. In the midst of storms we experience Jesus’ love and power. Martin Luther said that there are three things which make us sacred; baptism, communion, and suffering.

 Jesus is not a ghost. He is not a mere man, either. He is the Son of God who came to this world to die for our sins, to forgive us, and to save us. He knows our weakness. He knows our wounds and pain. He came to help us and save us. Whoever welcomes him and believes him will have eternal life. Let us pray. “Lord, forgive my unbelief and doubt. Forgive me and come into my heart as Lord and Savior. I believe that you died for my sin and rose again from the dead for our eternal life. I invite you in my heart as Lord and Savior. Guide me and bless my life until I see you face to face. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen! Let us read verse 20 again meaningfully. “*But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid*.” Amen!