Both of these passages have something in common. Luther himself taught that our natural reason knows of God vaguely. We know of God through His rule over this world. But when we try to imagine God, when we really try reach up to heaven and grasp who He is, our minds, being corrupted by original sin, will always miss the mark. Jonah’s compatriots worshiped an array of gods—none were real; Athens’ god was one whom had, as the Athenians themselves admitted, hidden himself from them. Today, there are so many different conceptions of god that modern life has been called a totality that says nothing because it tries to say everything. Our theories about God are as subjective and up-in-the-air as they’ve always been.

But the God of whom we can be totally certain is the God who comes to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the God who comes to us now in the Divine Service. There, all our doubts and apprehensions meet an end as we receive what is real and sure and firm—our Incarnate Savior, Mighty Lord and His promise of forgiveness. This God is all about the surety of faith, the confidence of a soul captivated by the will of his own Creator and Redeemer. There is God—not hidden, but revealed—the place where He Himself speaks, where He Himself wills to be for you. There the Words do what they say; create faith in us, causing us to place our certain trust on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ.

So, how is all of this related to the vocation of pastor? Because the Word we receive in the Divine Service is a Word embodied, coming through one of God’s own creatures—your pastor. Your pastor, who has been given the preaching office (German: predigtamt), is called and sent, not by man but by God, to convict you of sin and forgive you by the Holy Absolution. God’s own voice is found in his. God’s will toward you is manifest in the proclamation of His preacher, as it had been throughout all the company of the Holy Prophets and Apostles before you. In this preaching you can finally rest assured.

After Jonah received the command from God saying, “call out to [Nineveh] the call I am about to speak to you,” Jonah enters Nineveh’s streets, warning the city that “Yet in forty days, Nineveh is about to be changed.”

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1 Jonah 1:5.
2 Acts 17:23.
3 Jonah 3:4.
For that reason we give Him thanks and praise for the Office of the Holy Ministry, even as we petition Him unendingly to send faithful pastors into our lands with the sure Gospel on their lips, so that we too may hear, believe, repent and be saved.

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The Father’s Heart

A sermon by Dr. Paul J. Grime

The Feast of Saints Philip and James, Apostles, fell on May 1, 2012. On this, the eve of the seminary’s Call Service where seminarians and deaconess students were to receive their calls, Dr. Grime, Dean of the Chapel at Concordia Theological Seminary, gives students encouragement for the vocational challenges which lay before them using the comforting Words of our Lord from St. John’s fourteenth chapter, especially verse one, “Let not your hearts be troubled.”

In the Large Catechism Martin Luther gives this magnificent summary concerning the purpose of the Apostles’ Creed:

In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.

I have no doubt that when Luther penned these words he had the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel clearly in mind: No one comes to the Father except through Me. You really can’t say it any through Jonah’s preaching dispels Nineveh’s hardness of heart and unbelief, causing the citizens there to throw on the shabby, penitent garb of sackcloth, observe a fast and repent. Therefore God changed His verdict over them from one of judgment to one of salvation. Formerly Nineveh was a religious city, but religiously-pagan. Her ziggurats climbed the skies into heaven, reaching up to grasp the idols of their imaginations. It was only through Jonah’s preaching that the Gentiles “believed in God” and, as the Psalmist teaches, this is the same as “trusting in His salvation.”

St. Paul, standing deep in the midst of the thronging Areopagus offers, “What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” Even while some have attempted to seek Him and feel their way toward Him by creating idols of wood and stone based on their imaginations, Paul assures, “He is actually not far from each one of us,” even as we are His offspring. He is living, not dead. He commands us to repent for He has appointed a Man, even His only-begotten Son, to judge us in righteousness on a day fixed but unknown. In Christ rests our hope, confidence and boldness, Paul goes on, because He has been raised from the dead. At this a number of Paul’s hearers believed in God.

God is all about making you sure and certain. For the sake of our consciences, that they may finally be comforted and find rest, He has sent pastors to preach. For that reason we give Him thanks and praise for the Office of the Holy Ministry, even as we petition Him unendingly to send faithful pastors into our lands with the sure Gospel on their lips, so that we too may hear, believe, repent and be saved.

* Psalm 78:22.
clearer than that, which is why in the reading we heard from Acts this past Sunday the Apostle Peter expresses the same thought when he confessed before the religious rulers: *There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*

You are all familiar with the conversation that led to Jesus’ definitive statement. Thomas, who apparently wasn’t afraid to ask what many of us might fear was a stupid question, asked Jesus to explain His words about going away and coming back. Don’t forget when this conversation took place: the night of Jesus’ betrayal, just hours before His arrest and trial. Tensions in Jerusalem had been rising all week. None of the disciples could be sure what was about to happen. It was in that context that Jesus speaks one of His most memorable statements of comfort and peace: *Let not your hearts be troubled.*

Now, it’s tempting for me to digress here and talk about your troubled, anxious hearts as many of you wait to learn tonight and tomorrow where you’re headed next year. But you’ll hear plenty about that in the vicarage and placement services. Besides, it wouldn’t do justice to the trembling hearts Jesus means to comfort. These disciples feared for their Master’s life, and perhaps even more for their own.

But here’s a truth to consider: it won’t be long before many of you will be repeating those comforting words to souls that desperately need Jesus’ consolation. Souls burdened with deep fear and uncertainty, such as when a husband tells his wife that the marriage is over...that he’s leaving her and the kids. Or when the oncologist tells your father that the treatments are no longer working, that it’s time to stop. Or when you accompany the police to the home of one of your members to tell them that their child was just killed in a traffic accident at school. The spiritual care offered by pastors and deaconesses reverberates with Jesus’ words of comfort: *Let not your heart be troubled.* In some situations, it may be all that you can say to the man whom you visit in jail after his arrest for embezzling funds at work and to the woman whose life is in tatters because of her meth addiction; to the teenager who tells you that he’s seriously considering suicide and to the young woman who confesses to you her abortion.

Here’s an even more sobering truth: you are going to need Jesus’ words of comfort spoken to your own heart—on the day when you’re so fed up with other people’s problems, that you’re ready to abandon your office. Or when your wife complains that you seem more married to the congregation than you are to her. Or when you suddenly realize that your constant efforts to please everyone have caused you to abandon your principles. Or, God forbid, when you come to realize that you doubt the very words you proclaim, asking yourself whether your Lord has perhaps abandoned you. With Thomas, you will cry out: *How can we know the way?*

Good news, folks! You know the way because you know the Father’s heart. You know Him who is the way, the truth and the life. When you see Me, says Jesus, you’ve seen the Father. That’s enough. Like Philip, however, there are times when we want just a little more: *Show us the Father! That will be enough for us.* Who knows precisely what Philip was seeking? Perhaps a voice, like the one that came from the cloud at Jesus’ Baptism or a cloud enveloping them as it did at the Transfiguration. Maybe something a little more dramatic, like the lightning and smoke as the children of Israel encamped around Mount Sinai. It doesn’t really matter; just a little proof would be sufficient. Enfleshed creatures that we are, we’re very much of the mind that says, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Alas, that’s not the Father’s way, is it? There’s no proof for us to trot out, no spectacular signs to make Him evident, no dreams or visions or strange stirrings of the heart. *In many and various ways—and that included dreams and visions, fire and lightning, even still small voices—in those ways and more God spoke to His people of old by the prophets, but now in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son* (Hebrews 1:1–2a). That is enough—the Son’s witness: *I am in the Father and the Father is in Me. Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.* And what do we see? An angry and terrible judge? A God of vengeance whose wrath is waiting to be revealed? Well, there is that aspect to God; He is righteous and holy. But that’s not what the Son reveals. No, He shines a bright beam directly on the Father’s heart and reveals the totally unexpected: mercy, grace, God’s good favor. Again, we turn to Luther, who captures the essence of this unfathomable truth, this time in his memorable hymn, “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice”:

> But God had seen my wretched state
> Before the world’s foundation,
> And mindful of His mercies great,
> He planned for my salvation.
> He turned to me a father’s heart;
> He did not choose the easy part
> But gave His dearest treasure.

That’s the Son whom we follow, the Father’s dearest treasure. He is your way to the Father and leads you there in spectacular ways—not with outrageous signs and wonders, but through humble words by which He invites you to trust in Him. He’s doing it right now as these unworthy lips speak not by some authority I possess, but by His authority, which our Lord tells us is not even His own but comes from His Father. And, very shortly, you will follow in the Lord’s way as you ascend these steps, taking but a morsel of bread and a sip of wine—nothing too spectacular here—but trusting Your Lord’s promise that He has returned and is with you.

> Let not your hearts be troubled.

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Boats, Fishes and Fishers of Men

A sermon by Dr. Peter J. Scaer

Preaching to a small congregation, Dr. Scaer, Associate Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, puts Christ in the center of a world represented by the tumultuous sea and finds in Christ peace for the church represented by the disciples’ small fishing boat. What does it mean that Christ preaches from the boat? It means the presence of our Lord’s voice is still found in the church, which gathers around His presence in preaching and the Sacraments. A Sermon for Pentecost VI, July 8, 2007. The text is from Luke 5:1-11.

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Luke 5:1-11 ESV

When Christ wants to build a church, He opens a seminary. When He wants to catch fish, He begins teaching others to cast their nets.

And so it happened that our Lord was standing on the Sea of Galilee and the people were crowding around to hear Him speak. As Jesus was standing on the shore teaching, He saw two boats. The fishermen, Peter, James and John, were there beside the boats cleaning their nets, having come up empty-handed from a long night of fishing.

As a kid I remember that in the summer we would sometimes have a church service on the beach, by a lake in a camp setting. I remember being told about the acoustics of the lake: sound travels very well over water. Jesus, from the boat, could speak to a large crowd on the shore.

So, then Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and went out a little bit from the shore and taught the crowds from the boat. Everyone could hear Him loud and clear. That’s awfully important because the Word of Jesus is powerful and life-giving, and it needs to be heard. (It’s one of the reasons, by the way, I kind of like a small church, because everyone is up close.) Faith comes by hearing. The boat served as a kind of amplifier for the life-saving Word. But, I think, there’s more to it. Jesus was speaking from a boat and boats have a spiritual significance in the Bible.

The Bible’s first great boat, of course, was Noah’s ark. For whatever reason, everyone seems to love the story—the rains, the animals coming in two-by-two. The top movie this year, “Evan Almighty,” draws from the story of Noah. There are countless pictures and figurines depicting the story. Every culture, it seems, remembers the story of Noah’s ark in some way. But I’m not sure if the world understands that the story tells of God’s judgment on a sinful world, that it’s a message for us to repent; that it’s a message for us all to get onto the ark; that the ark pointed to the salvation which God would bring in Christ.

Indeed, from the very earliest days, the boat became the symbol for the church. Cyprian called the church “The ark of salvation.” Now, as you know from the story of Noah, the ark was huge. I’m told that the upper deck was the size of about 20 college basketball courts.

Now, in the ministry of Jesus, the tradition of the boat is carried on, though on a much smaller scale. Think for a moment of all the times in the Gospels where a boat is mentioned. One time Jesus was sleeping on the boat and the disciples were afraid that the boat would capsize in the
storm. Another time the disciples were out in a boat in the middle of the night struggling against the waves and wind, and Jesus came walking by. The disciples were terrified, thinking that they’d seen a ghost. From both of those stories we learned that the boat was the place of safety in the midst of the storm and the boat, even if it appeared to be sinking, would stay afloat. What mattered was Christ’s presence and no matter how bad life gets, no matter how much the devil may howl or how much the world may try to make us doubt or afraid, Christ is present with us, calming our fears, letting us know it’s going to be ok.

So, also, the church is our place of safety in the midst of life’s storms. It doesn’t matter what the size of the church; whether it’s large, like Noah’s ark, or small, like the fishing boats of Peter, James and John. After all, the Titanic, the largest ship ever built at the time, sank in the icy waters. The Mormon Church can grow all it wants. Islam may have huge houses of worship. But it doesn’t matter. In the midst of the storm, neither the Mormon boat nor the boat of Islam will stay afloat. On that final day you know where you want to be: on the boat with our Lord. What matters is that Christ is present.

Now, in this pericope, we see that the boat is particularly the place where we hear preaching. Or, we may say, the church is the place where Christ speaks. The church is the place where we hear the Word of God. The church is the place where crowds of people become disciples and where the children of men become, through Baptism, the children of God.

Jesus’ essential work during His earthly ministry indeed was to suffer and die for the sins of the world. Without His death, there could be for us no life. But He also knew that His work on earth would mean nothing if the news of what He accomplished weren’t told to the world. It would be to no effect if He did not establish the church where His Gospel could be proclaimed.

And, so along with His dying on the cross, He spent much of His ministry preaching and teaching. But it wasn’t enough for Him to teach and preach. He knew that the message needed to be multiplied and spread. He knew that His message had to be spread even after He ascended into heaven.

And, so, what does He do? After He finishes teaching and preaching to the crowds, He speaks to Peter. He calls Peter to His seminary. He calls Peter to train him to be a preacher, a fisher of men, saying, “Take the boat out where the water is deep and let down your nets for a catch.”
Now, Peter thought this odd, perhaps a bit nonsensical, saying, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and caught nothing and nighttime is the best time to catch fish. The shallower waters are the place to go. Why go out into the deep? You hardly ever get any fish there.” But God’s ways are not always our ways. And Jesus spoke with authority. Simon trusted Jesus, saying, “If you say so, I’ll let down the nets.” Now, this is faith. And indeed, when the men let down the nets, they caught a very large number of fish and their nets started to tear.

That’s the essence of the Holy Ministry. Ministers are called to be fishers of men, to pull men out of the sea and into the Ark of Salvation. And, indeed, even as the boat is a symbol of the church, a symbol of safety and salvation, so also is the sea a symbol. The sea is a symbol of despair. Many of the Psalms and the prophets speak of salvation as being pulled out of the depths of the sea.

I don’t know if any of you saw the movie “Open Water.” It’s about a married couple that goes scuba diving and due to a mix-up, the boat leaves without them and the couple is left out at sea, in the middle of a vast ocean. Most all of the movie depicts the couple’s loneliness and despair as they bob along in the water, awaiting their inevitable fate.

That’s the way we are, apart from Christ. We’re stuck out at sea. We’re alive, but not for long. We can’t swim forever. Even if we have a lifejacket, we can’t last out there forever. What we need is to be saved, to be brought onto the boat, to be brought onto the Ark of Salvation.

That’s exactly what happens through preaching. Christ cast His nets, or in this case, Peter casts his nets and this is a symbol of preaching. That’s what happens whenever we preach Christ; we don’t fish. We hook and bait; we’re not trying to catch a specific kind of fish; our message is not targeted at anyone in particular; it’s a message for all humanity. For all our differences, we have more in common than we have differences. We are all sinners and Christ has died for us all. As the Word is preached, as Christ is proclaimed, the fish are caught up in the Gospel net and, as you know, the fish, from the earliest time, has been a symbol for Christianity, a symbol for Christians.

In fact, there were so many fish, that Peter’s nets were about to break. So, what did Peter do? He motioned over to his partners, James and John, and they brought over their boat. There were so many fish that both boats were about to sink. Now, this is another detail that shouldn’t be overlooked, for the church is one. There is, in one sense, only one Ark of Salvation and that’s the one holy, Christian and apostolic church.

In other words, only in the church is there salvation. It’s not to be found in the mosque or in the synagogue. It’s not to be found in our own works, in any works of man or in any religion made by man. No, the church is where Christ is and where Christ is, there is life and salvation.

But where do we find the ship of salvation? There may be one ship, but we experience it in many different congregations. You remember that Peter and John were said to be partners. In Greek, this means that they were in koinonia with each other. They were in fellowship with each other and so it happened that Peter and John and, in fact, all the ministers of Gospel, go to various places, speak in various churches, speaking in little boats, each one of them being part of the great ship, which is the church.

Right now, we are in a small congregation and, from a worldly point of view, it may appear as nothing more than a little dinghy or a rowboat compared to the larger ships all around us. But it doesn’t matter, what matters is that Christ is with us. What matters is that His Word is being read from the lectern and preached from the pulpit. What matters is that He is present with us in His Supper.

Like all ministers, I can say with Peter, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Indeed, no minister is worthy to preach so wonderful a message as salvation in Christ. But that’s what we’re called to do as pastors, even us at the seminary; we are called to train others to fish, to be fishers of men.

Peter, James and John heard our Lord’s call and they left their fishing boats to become fishers of men, even as men are still hearing the call today and coming to the seminary.

James and John left their father Zebedee. Does this mean that Zebedee did not hear the Gospel call? By no means! James and John were called to be ministers of the Gospel, and Zebedee stayed where he was in the fishing business. In that place he did the Lord’s work as well. There, with his servants, he kept the fishing business going so that through his gifts and help he could financially support the work of his sons and of other Gospel ministers.

So whether we’re preachers, teachers at the seminary or whether we’re here in the pews, we’re all in this together. We’re all in the same boat. Some answer our Lord’s call by preaching and others by supporting the preaching of the Gospel. Because that’s finally what it’s all about—the Gospel.

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