

# Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



## “Facing Fear with Faith”

“Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid” (Mt 14:27).

You may remember these words from only a few weeks ago, taken from the Gospel for the 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary time. We heard of the Lord who, amidst a raging storm, came walking on the water, approaching the disciples who were in the boat. His message to them in the midst of the storm, is his message to us in the storm of this moment, indeed of these months.

It was just about one year ago in this column that I reflected on another passage from Matthew’s Gospel, remember? That one too was about a storm, and we were in the midst of the storm of the reported abuse and harassment of now former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the release of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report on the sexual abuse of minors, and the failure of some bishops to protect children.

Last year, I shared a well-known painting, Rembrandt’s “Storm on the Sea of Galilee,” and reflected on what a powerful image it was, with the reassurance that “Christ is in the Boat!”

Now, one year later, I’m sharing a lesser known image by a little known artist, of this other storm recounted by Matthew. This time, Jesus is not in the boat, but walking on the water toward the

disciples. We’re told when they saw him, they were terrified and cried out in fear.

The disciples were afraid! We are afraid: afraid of drowning in the polarizing messages of the media; afraid for ourselves or for our loved ones of getting sick or dying; afraid of the results of the upcoming election; afraid of the direction so many seem to be going; afraid of the increased violence and anarchy; afraid for our children and the reopening of school; afraid of going back to attend Sunday Mass; afraid of wearing or not wearing masks; afraid of so many things!



This summer, the fear of Covid-19 hit close to home as I had traveled to the Philadelphia area for some vacation time with family and friends. Soon after I arrived, I was informed that I had been exposed to someone who had tested positive, was to get tested myself, and needed to "self-quarantine." My vacation became isolation. I never got to see or visit with family or friends. Only after eight days did the results come back that I had tested negative. I experienced fear for myself and for those with whom I had come in contact. The fear was real. I came to understand more deeply the fear of so many of our faithful. But I found the only antidote to the fear was faith: faith that the Lord was in charge, faith that His will would be done, and faith that he would provide whatever grace I needed to confront whatever was to come.

These days, Jesus comes to us in the midst of the storm as he did to his first disciples, and offers this powerful word: "Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid."

Peter made bold to tell the Lord "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." But once Peter saw how strong the wind was he became frightened and, beginning to sink, cried out "Lord, save me!" Today, realizing how paralyzing is the fear all around us, we might feel like we're sinking, but we take courage in the one who can save us, and we cry out with Peter "Lord, save me!"

On my Facebook page post in which I reflected briefly on this Gospel passage, someone left this insightful comment referring to Jesus: "He offered not only his word but he offered his hand to Peter. I will grab it and hold on for this scary ride."

The winds are strong and the storm has been raging, the Coronavirus, painful staff reductions, the loss of jobs, the inability to gather together, so many cancelled events, and now, the horrible crimes

leading to the arrest of one of our priests that have once again outraged and grieved us. The storm is raging. When we were in the midst of some storm in life, my Dad would often counsel us: "just be sure to keep your nose above the water line!"

Once Jesus stretched out his hand and caught Peter, he said to him "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Jesus desires us to face our fears with faith, faith in him which overcomes our doubts.

There's another image I want to share with you – from the perspective of Peter who, looking up from under the water, vaguely sees the figure of Jesus, and a strong hand and arm plunged into the water ready to pull him up! Jesus questioned Peter's faith, but he saved him. In the midst of all the storms raging around us, we need to ask ourselves whether we are concentrating on how strong the winds are, whether our attention is

turned to being frightened by all that is around us, or whether we're keeping eyes fixed on Christ, seeing his strong hand and arm plunged through the wind swept waters ready to pull us up, and whether we're reaching out to him with confidence. We can face fear with faith, or with doubt. Together, let's face our fears with faith.

These days, don't focus on the storms but on Christ Jesus, and with deep faith hear him say: "Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid."

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