Good morning! I am acquainted with many of you but if we have not met, in way of introduction, I am Kevin Kessler, and in addition to my role in the district, I serve as pastor of the Canton, IL, congregation, am husband, dad, and papa (what my grandkids call me), and serve in volunteer capacities in the community of Canton. And as has been noted, I am the District Executive of the Illinois/Wisconsin District Church of the Brethren.

A little bit about the the District: It is geographically all of Illinois and Wisconsin, and consists of 34 congregations in Illinois, 1 in Wisconsin, 2 fellowships (the status prior to becoming a congregation), and 3 emerging ministries (or to state it another way, new church starts or new church plants). You, the Highland Avenue congregation, are part of the district, and as I would say to any congregation, you ARE the district, a cell of the whole that helps the whole to be all that it is and can be.

Many good things are happening in this district: emerging ministries; congregations involved in community gardens, Food Resource Bank, other community organizations and activities; sending supplies to Church World Service; being involved in disaster relief and response efforts; assisting our international Church of the Brethren partners; engaging in ecumenical conferences and councils; sending youth to NYC; being involved in BVS; doing the arduous work of revitalization; peacebuilding and conflict transformation; and the list goes on.
I’ll add this: our district, in my estimation, has been through some of the strenuous conversations around subjects and matters where we have strong convictions one way or another, and we’re continuing as faithful stewards and servants in the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So I have great respect for this district and am thankful for who we are and what we do.

And, yet, I still have some fears, to be completely honest and transparent, which I’ll say more about in a minute or two, but, before I do, it seems important to put into context an understanding of fear.

What is it we fear?

Easily, we can name many things. I don’t know if it is a blessing or a curse, but lines from songs come to mind when a subject is mentioned and one that comes to mind when thinking about fear is: I don’t like spiders and snakes... Of course the song doesn’t have much to with spiders and snakes, more about a young boy and girl exploring the intricacies of a relationship, but I can relate to the spiders and snakes thing, more spiders than snakes, for me.

We all have these fears, right? The phobias: arachnophobia, fear of spiders; dentophobia, fear of the dentist; glossophobia, fear of speaking in front of an audience (one I’ve had to overcome, and continue to work at).

But, this isn’t the kind of fear I want to focus on this morning. Another kind of fear, in my view, is the fear that results from something that has happened or is happening in our environment, in our surroundings, that causes deep anxiety within us.

The story from the 4th chapter of the Gospel of Mark is an example of this kind of fear.
As we learn from the story, Jesus says to his disciples after a long day of telling them parables and explaining their meaning to them, “Let’s cross over to the other side of the lake.”

Phobias set in. Fear of the water. Fear of what might happen on the water. Fear of the other side. The other side was Gentile country.

But, the real fear sets in as they are part way across the lake. A storm comes up, with strong winds, buffeting waves, the boat that Jesus is in is about to be swamped, overtaken with water and sunk.

Matt Skinner, professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, in writing commentary about this text indicates that the word great, a descriptive word for the storm, comes from the Greek word, megas. Seems very similar to the prefix mega- that we use. Skinner states, “If the disciples who fished for a living think they are bound to perish in the tempest, we should trust their judgment. Nothing indicates they overreact; this is no common storm.” Yeah, it’s a mega-storm, unlike others they may have encountered. They fear for their lives, as a result of something that is happening in their surroundings.

So, what are these fears for us?

I mentioned that I have fears for the district—one mainly. One in my mind that seems rather storm like. And, no, my fear does not stem from the anxiety prevalent in our denomination. My fear is the availability of leadership among us. From where will leadership emerge in an aging district, when younger generations are finding it more of a challenge to remain connected to organizational structures, when the number of congregations searching for pastors outnumbers the list of pastors searching for placement by about 3 to 1.
Is the boat, our boat, this district, being buffeted by the winds of this leadership desert to the point of being unable to remain organized, and continue sailing forward to distant shores?

I’m naming my fear. What is yours? As it relates to this district? Our denomination? Our nation? Our planet?

With all that is happening in our nation presently, with concerns around immigration, with significant partisanship, with divisive public discourse. Can our nation survive the storm?

What storms seem mega, great to you right now, happening in your environment/surroundings, that increase your anxiety/fear?

These mega storms surrounding us are as real for us as the storm on the lake was to the disciples. And we may react as the disciples did: Jesus, don’t you care that we are perishing?

We have 2000 more years of anecdotal and empirical stories to influence our understanding that Jesus is not asleep in the stern of our boats, and yet we ask, and our question carries the implication that we think Jesus is not paying attention.

Or might it be the question is not one of wondering why Jesus is not paying attention, but rather a question that implies something about our faith? Not that we are faithless, but that we have faith in the one who can help us through these mega-storms.

Consider what happens when Jesus is awakened in the boat. He doesn’t immediately admonish the disciples for their lack of faith, rather he immediately acts upon the storm: Peace! Be still! And, according to this story, there was a dead calm. From mega-storm to dead calm.

Did Jesus react to the disciples question to increase their faith or because of their faith?
We could likely take either side, but I prefer to approach this story from the angle that Jesus reacted **because** of their faith.

The disciples had developed a relationship with Jesus, knew his care for them, and so rather than trying to navigate this life threatening situation on their own, they reached out, in faith, to the one whose wisdom and teachings and actions were giving them life, sustaining them, strengthening them.

So when we ask the question, “Don’t you care that we are perishing, Jesus,” in relation to our storms, what is our intent, or what are we saying about our faith?

Does our question indicate a faith that trusts in the one who calms storms simply because we ask?

And is the important take away that Jesus calms storms, or that we have faith in Jesus’ storm calming presence?

And if we have faith, then...why are we afraid?

That’s a $64000 question, or by today’s standards a Million dollar question, or maybe a priceless question. A question that needs to be asked, not for the purpose of admonishment, as a statement condemning our lack of faith, but rather an encouragement pointing us in the direction of recognizing we do have faith, that this is the angle from which we are coming when at the moment we do not recognize or realize it.

Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?
These questions Jesus presents, encourage the disciples to see, to take stock of their faith, to see understand that because they have reached out to Jesus, they believe in the relationship, and the value of that relationship. Have you still no faith? Not an admonishment, but an eye opener. Take stock of yourselves. Realize you do.

When in the midst of the storm, this all doesn’t make a lot of sense. Anxiety is high. Recognizing who we are in relation to the one who encourages, enlightens, and strengthens us not always apparent. And then when it is all over, and we see where Jesus has been active, we step back in awe. Wow! Jesus really does care about us, enough that he will not allow us, as a group, a body, to perish.

You know, I’m still in the storm about leadership in this district. I don’t know the outcome, but I have faith, and I’ll continue to reach out to Jesus. And I hope that whatever storms you are enduring presently, that you, too, will reach out in faith to this One who cares deeply about us and whether or not we perish.

This story is real to me, and is something that I have experienced. Roughly 28 years ago, my dad was diagnosed with colorectal cancer. I remember when he told me, simply saying that the news he received was not good, that he had cancer, and that he would undergo surgery to remove the mass, and a portion of his colon. Although the surgery went well, the outcome was a colostomy, with the possibility that a subsequent surgery would reverse the colostomy. That time came, the surgery was done, but the surgeon was unable to do the reversal. I have a difficult time remembering if it was the first or second surgery that caused
dad difficulty. Whichever one it was, the issue was a kink in the colon following surgery, which meant a blockage, and if the blockage was not corrected by medication, another surgery would be required. What I do remember, vividly, is the significance of what this additional surgery would mean to dad’s life. Would he be able to endure it? He was already weak, uncomfortable. I saw the stress on mom. I saw the concern on the faces of my sisters. We were in the midst of a storm.

I also vividly remember going to the hospital chapel right after the decision had been made to do surgery the following morning. I was pretty blunt in my prayers, yet realizing that all options had been exhausted, and it was no longer in our hands, EXCEPT to exercise our faith, my faith, in my helplessness.

Between the time I spent in the hospital chapel and the next morning, the blockage in dad’s system had dissolved...surgery was averted. Dead calm.

Why was I afraid? Why are you afraid? Have faith!