

“FACING FEAR’S FIERCE GRIP”

Mark 4: 35-41

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I can identify with the disciples in the text from the Gospel of Mark. When I was young in Charleston, SC, I used to race my sailboat. I really wasn't that competitive, but I loved being on the water. On one Saturday, the race had begun, and I was in my usual dead last position. I thought I would just finish the race—and then the storm hit. And when a squall hits a body of water like Charleston Harbor, watch out! It became quite rough. The wind and waves were so forceful that not only did I tip the boat over, but I turned it what sailors call “turtle.” That is, the boat is completely upside down with the mast pointing to the bottom of the harbor. When your boat is in that position, you have to stand on the bottom of the boat, pull on the centerboard, and turn the boat right side up. I managed to right the boat. I finished the race after they passed out all of the trophies. It had been a frightening experience. It reminds me now of what the poet wrote: “Thy sea, O God, so great/My boat so small ...” But the experience was not half as frightening as the scowling look on my father's face as I sailed past the dock.

Life is full of fears, isn't it? We're fearful that we will fail as parents or spouses, fearful about our decisions, fearful about our money, scared to take risks, afraid that we'll get to the end of life, and ask why I did what I did. We're fearful of disease and death and loss. Fear has us in a fierce grip. And our fears can have some deadly effects. They can prevent us from being our best, and they can keep us trapped in inaction and paralysis and taking risks that life often calls us to take.

Our scripture lesson knows exactly how we feel. “A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.” Imagine the sea lifting them up and tossing them to and fro. The power of the waves washing over the bulkheads created fear and panic in the disciples. And life is like that too, tossing us back and forth, pitching and yawing. Think about how much life is constantly changing in our world. As soon as you master one form of technology, a new one arises, requiring new learning. And who likes change? We want stability and smooth sailing, but what we get are swirling oceans of change. How we get the news, patterns of work, education—all have changed. And who isn't fearful these days about the political climate of our country and the conflicts abroad in the world

Through it all we ask the same question those first disciples did. “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Does God really care that everything nailed down is coming loose and we are drowning in fear and uncertainty? There is the story of a young boy who was asked to say grace before the evening meal. Billy began, “Dear God, thank you for these pancakes ...” When he paused, his mother gave him a puzzled look. “Billy, why did you thank God for pancakes when we are having chicken?” He smiled and said, “I thought I'd see if God is really paying attention.” So do I. I wonder if God notices us. Is God paying attention to our trials and problems? The whole world of the disciples was coming apart in that boat, but in the back of the boat is an incredible sight: Jesus is asleep. Is that really the kind of God we need? One who sleeps through the stormy moments of life?

There is something deeply intriguing in this story when you observe that Jesus is sleeping in the midst of the storm. There is one who is at peace no matter what events are swirling around him. No matter how perfect the storm is, Christ is at perfect peace. And that tells me something about what faith is.

Jesus doesn't rebuke the disciples because of their doubt or questioning. When he calms the storm, he asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The fact that Jesus links these two questions together—fear and faith—tells me that the opposite of faith is not unbelief or doubt. The opposite of faith is fear. Fear that God is not there. Fear that we will fail. Fear that all of our well-laid plans will fall apart. Fear that the things we value will come to naught. Fear that clouds our minds from the assurance that Christ is present with us in the storm. Fear that the boat—our boat, all that we value, all those life-projects in which we invest with so much hope—will sink. Faith is not simply some intellectual conviction or doctrine; faith is a heart-felt reality, more akin to trust. Faith is trusting our lives to God; our efforts, our resources, as well as our doubts and our fears. In our lesson from 1 Samuel, David goes out to fight a warrior twice his size. It's his faith that focuses him completely on the task before him. The gigantic problem he has is not only his, but also God's. He says; "This battle is the Lord's." When that kind of faith is in our hearts, then the consequence of that faith can be peace and calm, like Jesus sleeping in the boat. Faith is not the belief that God will take away all those storms that swirl around us, but that God will still that inner storm that distracts us, that robs us of focus.

How do we get that kind of faith, the faith that gives us peace? If you read the parallel version of this story in the Gospel of Matthew, you discover that it focuses on the apostle Peter and his attempt to walk upon the water. Peter is able to walk upon the water because he is focused on Jesus Christ. When he takes his eyes off of Christ, he begins to sink. Maybe conquering our fears has everything to do with where our attention is focused. "Keep your eyes upon Jesus," the old hymn says. Keep your eyes upon the Risen Christ. That's the source of power and courage.

John Killinger tells the story that when he and his wife were teenagers and he was courting her, he had to pass a large graveyard to get to her home. As most graveyards are at night, it was quite spooky. When he went by, he would always look straight ahead, but out of the corner of his eye, he was watching to see if anything was sneaking around in that graveyard. He said that his heart was in his throat. But once he had seen his sweetheart and spent a couple of hours in her presence, he had an entirely different attitude when he went past that graveyard. He wasn't thinking of ghosts and goblins. His heart was pounding with love, and that was taking all of his adrenaline. He didn't have any left over for being afraid. (From John Killinger's Preaching the New Millennium, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, p. 136)

With our hearts fixed upon Christ, we won't have to surrender to our fear. We don't have to face the future with apprehension. With our gaze upon Christ, we know that he's in the boat with us. We don't have to worry about the end result because we know as Paul the Apostle says, "that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord." That doesn't mean for Christians that we are exempt from suffering or from being swallowed by some pretty big storms. It means that God is with us and will work through whatever we experience for the sake of his loving purposes, and that in the midst of those storms, we cannot be separated from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

With Christ in the boat, with our eyes upon him, we don't have to worry about the wind and the waves, because he will give us courage for the tasks ahead. To live with that kind of courage and faith is truly a miraculous existence. We can live that way because Christ is with us. One day, if it hasn't already occurred, you will find yourself in a storm. Those storms rise up and put us in peril.

But do something today. Invite Jesus Christ into that boat with you. Think today about those storms which are raging about you, and then ask Jesus Christ to get into your boat. Tell him boldly what your fear is. "Cast your burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain you," the Psalmist says. Stand firm, and God will honor that kind of faith. It will be different. That's what our story promises. With Christ with us and beside us, we can weather the storms, and you will then know beyond any doubt and any fear who it is that even the wind and the sea obey.