

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”

36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

40 He said to them,

“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

FEAR AND FAITH

There are more things wrought by fear than “this world dreams of”. Let me give you a few “hypothetical” examples.

A group of church leaders talk for hours about fixing the church roof. Why don’t they just hire someone?

Their argument is not about the roof. It’s about the fact that the church is in trouble financially. They know that staff will need to be laid off. They wonder if one day there won’t even be a church on that corner.

But, they don’t talk about that. Instead they ruminate on the leaky roof for hours. Fear motivates their inaction.

A husband and a wife argue about taking a vacation at the beach. Why all this tension about planning a vacation? They are struggling financially.

They desperately need a vacation, but they also wonder if there will be enough money to pay the bills when they get back home. But, they don't talk about what they really fear. Instead they go back and forth about whether to take a vacation.

Fear animates and drives their argument.

A teen-age son and a father are having a knock down drag out fight about how late the teen can stay out with the car. The son is afraid of missing out on the fun. He knows that all his friends will definitely be out late. He is afraid of peer pressure.

On the other hand the father is motivated by another fear. He is afraid of all the things that might harm his child. Fear is just below the surface in many of our more difficult moments.

William Willimon, a bishop in the Methodist Church told of preaching in a church that was celebrating its 100th anniversary. As he was preparing for the service with the minister, Willimon asked, "What is the mood of this congregation as they celebrate this important milestone?"

The minister turned, looked Willimon in the eye and said without hesitation, "Scared!"

It seems that this congregation was in the middle of a changing neighborhood. No one lived within walking distance of the church anymore, and if they did they would be afraid to try it.

The expensive alarm system that the church was forced to install had not kept them from having a number of close encounters of the criminal kind. A choir loft that once was once full now was empty except for six members that were paid from the church's shrinking endowment.

There were many empty pews on that Sunday, and an undeniable gloom had seemed to settle over the congregation. Willimon said, "The pastor was right. They were afraid." They had reason to be.

Today's lesson asks us to think about our fears. Is it wrong to be afraid? More than that, is it unfaithful to be afraid?

You probably noticed Jesus' sharp words to his disciples in our lesson for today. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Those words are hard to hear because they apply to me. Yes, Lord I am afraid. I know much more about Jesus than those first disciples. And yet many of the things I do are done not out of faith but out of fear.

And I bet the same is true for you.

That's what I want us to think about this morning. What is the relationship between fear and faith?

Is all fear bad? Does fear always stop faith dead in its tracks? And how exactly does faith prevent fear from taking over our lives?

THE OTHER SIDE

In our lesson Jesus is preaching to a crowd using a boat as a pulpit. It's getting dark, and he decides it is time to cross the sea to the "other side".

Some commentators suggest that Jesus crossed to the other side to get away from the press of the crowds, to get a little peace and quiet. But, I would suggest that when you sail with Jesus you are always sailing directly into the storm. And the storms do not always occur on the Sea of Galilee.

In this case the "other side" to which they go is Gentile territory. When they finally make it to the other side, before they can even make landfall a man possessed by demons comes running toward them. And this creates a "storm" of conflict with evil powers and the powers that be.

The next crossing to the "other side" in Mark's gospel (Mark 5:21) will take them into encounters with the silent desperation of a hemorrhaging (and therefore unclean) woman, and the chaotic grief of a household in which a little girl has died.

"Storms" of various kinds follow Jesus wherever he goes.

It shouldn't surprise us. Jesus is forever crossing over to the other side.

Jesus is forever breaking social and spiritual boundaries. He eats with sinners, breaks Sabbath laws, criticizes powerful leaders, and confronts those possessed by demons.

Crossing to the other side with Jesus is always a risky, unpredictable proposition. It was then, and it is now. And this storm at sea gives us a graphic illustration of what can happen you sail with Jesus. It will not always be smooth sailing.

DON'T YOU CARE?

So, Jesus (who is already preaching from the boat) tells the disciples to push off for the other side. They obey. It's getting dark. It's been a long day. Jesus decides to get some sleep while his disciples sail the boat to the other side.

Suddenly a great windstorm arose. The waves were swamping the boat. And how did Jesus respond to this massive storm? He continues to snooze! Apparently Jesus and I have one thing in common. We can sleep through anything!

But, the disciples are wide-awake, and they are afraid. They come to Jesus, shake him awake and ask a question that is shaped by their fear.

The disciples don't say, "Teacher we need your help." The disciples come to Jesus and say, "TEACHER, DON'T YOU CARE THAT WE'RE DYING?"

That's not a request born of faith. That's an accusation born of fear.

We sometimes make that same accusation. We get in the boat with Jesus intent on making it to the other side and out of the blue a storm comes roaring down the valley.

We lose our job. We receive an unexpected and frightening medical diagnosis. We receive that dreaded phone call in the middle of the night.

And where is Jesus when the storm hits? Well, sometimes it seems like he must be asleep. And like the disciples we want to shake him awake and ask, "Don't you care that we're perishing?"

Fear can take over in an instant. Fear can make even the strongest faith seem frail. Life is fragile, and the waters can become rough in the blink of an eye.

THE STORM DRIVEN CHURCH

I visited recently with a friend from seminary, Randy Calvo. Randy is in charge of development and financial planning for Columbia Seminary.

I said something about the fact that our denomination was going through some “rough waters” these days.

And he replied with a laugh, “That’s the biggest understatement of the year!”

Randy, as a representative of one of our seminaries has found himself in the middle of a perfect storm. He, along with many other disciples in our denomination is bailing water and wondering how long we can keep the boat afloat.

The downturn in the economy and divisive social issues are like giant waves crashing into our small lifeboat. Everywhere I go people seem to be operating more out of fear than faith.

This isn’t the first time the church has been afraid. In fact an early symbol of the church was a boat on a storm tossed sea with a cross for its mast.

Storms will always be a part of the church’s story. But, the important question is this: whom do we trust in the middle of that storm?

In the Old Testament the sea was a symbol of chaos; it was the abode of evil forces. Only God was able to bring peace to the storm tossed sea.

So the calming of the storm is more than just a miracle that happened long ago. It is a story that symbolizes the power of Christ. This story tells us that God was in Christ. Jesus, in language reminiscent of the Creator awakens and rebukes the sea as he had often rebuked demons.

This miracle is not just about having power over nature. This miracle is about having power over the chaos that threatens to disrupt our world. Jesus not only rescues the disciples from the storm; he also rescues them from the fear and disorder that threatens their soul.

A FEARFUL MIRACLE

The storm on the outside is often fierce. We need salvation from the storm. But, it is the storm raging on the inside that needs to be quelled even more. In fact that storm on the inside often rages long after the wind and the waves subside. That's how it was with the disciples.

Jesus rebuked the wind and the waves and that eliminated the danger to life and limb. But, the disciples were still afraid. Notice Jesus didn't ask, "Why were you afraid?" The answer to that question would have been obvious. They were about to drown and Jesus was asleep!

Instead, Jesus asked, "Why *are* you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40) The disciples had more fear after the miracle than before.

The NRSV tells us that the disciples were "filled with great awe". Actually, that's too weak a translation. A more literal translation of that phrase would be, "they feared a great fear."

Facing the life-threatening storm was nothing in comparison to facing the one who could control the storm. They thought they knew Jesus, but now they have to wonder if they really did. They asked each other, "Who is this that can command even the wind and the waves?"

The early church found its own story in this story of Jesus and his disciples crossing the lake. As the disciples were seized with a holy fear, so the members of the early church were seized with fear.

Following the God revealed in Jesus was no small thing in those days. In 70 AD (around when Mark was written) the Roman Empire had destroyed Jerusalem and scattered her inhabitants all over the ancient world. It looked like the storm would sink that little lifeboat we call the church.

But, the church remembered how Jesus stilled the storm. And they realized that the Savior could be trusted to deliver them from their storm as well.

What about us? Will we find our story in this story? Will we be able to respond in faith when Jesus invites us to cross over to the other side?

Will we be able to trust God's salvation even when the wind and the waves look like they will overwhelm us? Will we have enough courage to embrace the holy and go where God calls us to go?

FIGHTING FEAR WITH FEAR

Throughout the Bible we hear the message of the angels again and again. Don't be afraid. Trust in the grace of God.

Jesus tells us that faith is the antidote for fear. Faith is trusting God to make a way when there seems to be no way. We believe that Jesus is Lord even when the storm comes. We believe that He commands the wind and the waves, and we believe that he directs our lives as well.

I once wrote a sermon entitled "Fighting Fear with Fear." It was based upon that familiar Old Testament text which reads, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Psalm 111:10)

Fear in this case refers to being filled with awe at the power and salvation of God. That's a good description of Easter fear, the fear the disciples felt when they first met the risen Christ. And Easter fear is the antidote for all those other fears that seek to dominate and control our life.

If our life is filled with a sense of the holy, if like those first disciples can ask in wonder and awe and fear, "Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey?" then the other fears of life lose much of their punch.

Put another way, the key to overcoming fear is worship, unconditional heartfelt worship. Worship is not a style or a certain kind of liturgy. Worship is being overwhelmed by the salvation and power of a holy God.

Fred Craddock told a story about a pastor who went to visit a church member in the hospital. The woman had a terminal disease, and the pastor knew it. At the end of the visit he would pray one of those prayers that acknowledges the situation and accepts the fact that not much was going to change.

I've prayed prayers like that. They go something like this,

"God, we thank you that you are with us in every circumstance. We ask if you choose not to change things then change us and give us the courage to accept your will for our future. Remind us that we are in your strong, all knowing hands, and we have hope not only for this life but for the life to come."

The pastor was prepared to pray that kind of prayer, but the woman wanted a different kind of prayer. She wanted him to beg God to heal her. And so, against his better judgment the pastor prayed fervently for the woman to be healed.

When the prayer was over he left the room, but a few days later he came back for another visit. The woman was sitting up in bed. The tubes had been removed. The curtains were open.

She said, “You won’t believe what happened. The doctors noticed some changes the other day. They called for more x-rays, and they have told me they can no longer see any sign of a tumor. I’m going home tomorrow.

The pastor said later, “When I got out to the parking lot, I looked up into the skies and said, ‘don’t you ever do that to me again!’”

There’s something about the power of God that ought to make us fear. God’s power is not something that we can manage. God’s power is unexpected. It is above and beyond us.

This is the kind of fear the Israelites had in the wilderness. They said to Moses, “You go up on the mountain. We’re scared. God’s up there.”

THE FEARFUL RENNOVATION

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of salvation.

There will be wind and waves. There will be unexpected twists and turns. After all God was in Christ, and the Spirit of God comes to dwell in us.

This boat we sail on does indeed have a cross for a mast and is ever sailing on stormy seas. But, this is how God chooses to save us.

The church was in a declining neighborhood. In fact, this church was just about to close its doors. The bishop told the young preacher, “They’ve lost their neighborhood. We don’t expect much from this church. Just tend to their needs.”

But, this young woman was not so eager to throw in the towel so she made an attempt to revitalize the church. She found that they actually did have a neighborhood. It consisted mainly of poor families and a few street people.

So, the pastor urged the church to open their doors to the people who were there. They began a soup kitchen for the poor and served nearly 50 meals every weekday at noon. A health care cooperative took up residence in some of the church's unused Sunday school rooms, turning them into a health clinic for the poor.

Now, on Sundays, that once declining empty church is nearly half full of people. People come from six or seven blocks away to the church that has done so much for her neighborhood.

The bishop was delighted with the progress made by this church. He said that it was one of the most inspiring pieces of good news that he had heard lately.

And then the minister said, "Trouble is, many of our best, long-time members just couldn't take it. They've left.

They were all prepared for our last days as a church. And then, wonder of wonders, our church was raised, given a new mission, a reason for living. And it scared them to death."

C.S. Lewis wrote that letting the fearsome mystery into your life is like having your house redone; except that God does it according to God's own wildly extravagant plans, throwing up a new wing here and there, enlarging rooms, making grand windows where there once were only walls.

You thought it was only going to be a gable or two. But, God's plan is to build out of you a palace, so that that God can come and dwell there.

There's a show on the do it yourself channel entitled Renovation Realities. Changing a home looks so easy on TV, but as this show illustrates real life is something else. There is much to fear when we start tearing down walls and adding square footage.

Much can go wrong. And it usually does. Home renovation is a fearful process.

And the same is true when the Spirit of God comes into our life, and rearranges our "home". It is not easy to have our world turned upside down and inside out by the call of God in Christ.

There are storms ahead when you follow Jesus.

And yet in this terrifying presence and power there is also salvation. Faith and fear are not mutually exclusive. In God's kingdom they live side by side.

Amen.