

Mark 4.35 - 41

Jesus Stills a Storm

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 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?' 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. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' 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?'

Sermon

I think it's safe to say that most of us have some experience with fear. I have a fear of heights – a fear that could quite easily escalate to paralysis if say I was forced to climb a cliff face. I also have a fear of confined spaces – of not being able to breathe. These are fairly common kinds of fears.

Many of us have other fears in common. Some of us fear losing our health and being dependent on others to take care of us. Some of us fear being unable to support ourselves financially, especially in these changing economic times. Some of us fear for our loved ones or fear losing a loved one, and the loneliness that would entail for us. Some of us fear change – the possible loss of what is familiar and comfortable to be replaced by the unknown. And some of us, of course, fear the ultimate unknown which is death.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus confronts the fear of his disciples although, at first sight, it seems rather odd that Jesus asked the question, "Why are you afraid?"

Some of his disciples were seasoned fishermen, who knew the Sea of Galilee well and the dangers of a storm. Despite their best efforts at keeping the boat afloat, it was beginning to sink! Experience told them that their chances of surviving in open water under those conditions were not good. They were afraid for very good reason. But Jesus asks the question because he wants them to see beyond the immediate. "Have you still no faith?"

One of the main themes throughout the Gospels is that, despite all that they witnessed Jesus do and say, --- despite all that they discovered him to be, ---- over and over his disciples showed how frail and shallow was their faith. It strikes us as both disappointing and yet also strangely comforting that this is so ---- that the very ones who were closest to him struggled just like everybody else to trust in him. When confronted with something that they didn't understand or something that instilled fear in them, --- over and over again, the disciples seemed all too easily to abandon their faith.

It is this that Jesus is really concerned with as he looks at his first disciples --- and doubtless too as he looks at you and me.

"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

There are some things that are frightening, and it is only human for us to respond to them with fear. But it is one thing for us to feel fear, and quite another thing for us to live in fear. Too often, we don't just feel fear, we turn it into something that occupies our whole lives. We don't just feel fear, we let it move in and take up residence. We don't just experience fear, we turn it into a giant, category-five storm that sends us running for cover.

God in Christ knows what fear does to us when we give it that much power over our lives. We cling to whatever it is we fear losing—we hold on for dear life! And what we desperately fear to lose, we will sometimes do anything to keep. In the process we try to control what we cannot control; we try to cling to what we cannot hold. That can make us incredibly selfish, childish, and even angry and bitter when things don't go the way we hoped they would.

Jesus challenges our tendency to allow fear to control our lives.

But I think his other question can help us here as well. Have you still no faith?

So often when we speak of the faith, we equate it with the content, the doctrine, the dogma of the Church. But the faith of which Jesus speaks is basic trust in God. The faith that at the outset had enabled the disciples to drop what they were doing and to follow Jesus. We say we believe God is a God of love, and that God loves us unconditionally. But the real challenge is to entrust ourselves, our loved ones, our hopes and dreams, our very lives into the care of this loving God—especially when we're afraid. The only way to do this is to let go of whatever it is we're afraid to lose — whether our health, our financial security, our relationships, or even our very life.

If the essence of fear is trying to control, the essence of faith is letting go. When we can do that— --- - when we can let go, then we can find peace, and contentment, and even joy taking the place of fear—regardless of our circumstances. I'm not going to pretend that this is easy, because it's not. The challenge is to look beneath the fear and see the sustaining hand of the God of grace. That's something that we have to do day by day, hour by hour, even moment by moment.

Faith is not a magic charm that somehow protects us from loss or hardship or catastrophe.

Faith is basic trust—trust in the God who says, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb. 13:5).[9]

That doesn't mean that bad things will never happen to us. What it does mean is that when they do, our faith keeps us from going under— or perhaps we should say, the one in whom we place our faith keeps us from going under! When the fears of life crowd in and threaten to take over our minds and our hearts then is the time to keep our eyes fixed firmly upon Jesus and indeed to try to fill our minds and our hearts with his words – with his story.

On that other famous occasion on the Sea of Galilee when Peter walked upon the water – he overcame his fear by keeping his eyes firmly upon his Saviour --- and only when he allowed himself to think of what lay below did he waver. In this instance Jesus was asleep during the storm.

Why was he not afraid?

Because he had faith.

He had faith that his hour had not yet come. He believed that his death would be at a different time in a different place and in a different way. But also because he had faith that God's will --- whatever it might be --- would ultimately be for the good.

It was that faith that he showed in Gethsemane when his own fear was very great. "Can you not take this cup away from me? But your will, not mine, done." That is how Jesus lived his life – and so much of his authority --- so much of his peace and gentleness and life-giving grace came from the fact that that is how he lived his life.

To live thus is to live in the Kingdom. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.

We live in a time when the phrase "The politics of fear" is regularly heard. Such politics has many spokespersons – at every point of the political spectrum. They seek to gain our support by playing to our fears. No good will ever come from giving sway to the politics of fear. History demonstrates this very clearly.

In our personal lives and in the lives of congregation, community, nation and world --- God calls us from fear to faith.

From terror to trust.

From death to life.

The Lord says "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last and I am the living one. I was dead and now I am alive for evermore."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen