

Faithing Our Fears

Matthew 14:22-33

August 28, 2005

The story goes that one day a certain man boarded a plane that was flying from New York to London. As the jet sat ready for take-off at the runway, the pilot's voice came over the speaker system: "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome aboard flight 222 for London's Heathrow Airport. Today we will be flying at 35,000 feet and at approximately 500 miles per hour. Our flight course will take us over Canada, Iceland, Greenland, and a small part of Ireland. We shall be in the air about eleven hours. We are almost ready to take off now ...just as soon as I get up my nerve!"

Fear. Phobia. It comes in many forms. Folk musician John McCutcheon wrote a song entitled "Phobias" with his son's fourth grade class. These are some of the phobias they name: hydrophobia – fear of water

microphobia – fear of germs
claustrophobia – fear of small places
agoraphobia – fear of large places
erythrophobia – fear of blushing
zoophobia – fear of animals
arachnophobia – fear of spiders
nyctophobia – fear of the dark
hogaphobia – fear of pigs
homeworkaphobia – fear of studying
phonaphobia – fear of telephones
meanaphobia – fear of bullies
phobiaphobia – the fear of fears!¹

Most of us could add our own verse to the song, naming those things which arouse fear within us. Adults might confess to changeaphobia, failurephobia, povertyphobia, abandonmentphobia. We fear the loss of financial security. We fear that people will not approve of us. We fear being inadequate, not good enough. We fear that others might harm us or the ones we love. I confess that I thought twice before stepping onto BART a week after the subway bombings in London last month. I have not been on an airplane since 9/11, so when we flew to Alaska this month I was sobered by the security process we now undergo to keep our airplanes safe. We live on the edge of fear.

In this morning's scripture we find Jesus' disciples at the fourth watch of the night, between 3 and 6 a.m. Jesus has spent the night praying alone on land. He sent the disciples to cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Apparently while they are crossing the lake, one of the sudden storms typical for that body of water arises. The boat is caught in the storm, battered by the waves, pushing against the wind. It is far from the safety of the shore, at a seemingly great distance from where Jesus is harbored in prayer. To add to their terror, they see a ghost coming toward them.

We know something of the haunting character of nighttime. Even in our sleep we experience nightmares that fill us with dread and cause us to break out in sweat. Sometimes the darkness of night finds us tossing and turning, not on the sea, but in our beds, troubled by the concerns of the day, which are often magnified to overwhelming proportions in the middle of the night. In the midst of the terrifying darkness, we feel engulfed, impotent, sometimes to the point of drowning. We fear that we will never find our way through the storm, that the waves will fill our boat and pull us down into the depths of the sea forever. The sea has long been a metaphor for chaos, and sometimes in the dark of night when we want to be peacefully asleep, we find ourselves unwittingly swept into the chaotic sea.

That's where the disciples find themselves this night, tossed about in the storm swept sea of chaos without Jesus, overcome by fear. Water can be life giving, but it can also be very destructive, as Florida is witnessing again with Hurricane Katrina. For the disciples, the water has suddenly become destructive. They are fearful for their lives. Their fear is a warning of danger, increasing the blood flow and readying the body for action. Fear can also manifest itself in strange ways. For instance, the disciples in the boat don't recognize the figure coming toward them as their friend Jesus. Their perception is distorted by fear and they think it is a ghost. They are terrified.

Richard Rohr says, "The greatest enemy of faith is not doubt; the greatest enemy of faith is fear. Most of the world is controlled by fear, petty and big. Petty fears control people; great fears control nations. We could feed all the people in this world if we would stop building arms, but we are afraid."²

The disciples' faith in Jesus is overcome by their fear. In contrast, Jesus is coming to be present with them in the midst of their distress. His action shows us the nature of Jesus. He cares so deeply about friends who are engulfed in a dangerous storm that he walks toward them as a sign of God's calming, healing, ordering presence. Jesus conquers the chaotic sea

by walking over it to saving his foundering friends. He meets their fear with his comforting words, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

When we find ourselves charting chaotic seas, whether it be terrorism, economic injustice, violence, or war, Jesus is walking on the churning water toward us to be with us. Like the fishermen in the boat, our tendency in the face of challenge is to panic. But Jesus comes to calm our anxiety, saying, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” He comes to join us in the boat and travel the rocky seas alongside us.

This is true for us corporately as well as personally. Whatever personal, private chaos is stirring in our lives, whether it be relationships, work, health, family, money, alcohol, stress, Jesus walks toward us, coming to ease our fears, renew our faith, and ride the rough waves beside us.

The story is told of a seeker who met Jesus on a lonely road. “Lord,” inquired the pilgrim, “after the people had been fed with the bread and fish, you said to your disciples: ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost’ (John 6:12). What are the fragments that must be gathered up so that nothing will be lost?” Jesus gazed at the wayfarer a long moment and then answered: “The fragments are your fears, which multiply like the loaves and fishes and fill more baskets than you can carry by yourself. These must not be lost. Instead, they must be brought to me, so that I may bear them with you. In this way, nothing that is part of you will be left unfound.”³

Jesus comes to receive the whole of us – our faith and our fears, our trust and our doubt, our love and our indifference. He accepts us as we are and in his presence we are transformed. Sometimes, like Peter, it takes us a while to trust Jesus. Upon seeing Jesus, Peter tests him. “Lord, if it is really you, command me to come to you on the water.” Peter wants to be as great as Jesus. Perhaps it’s a bit arrogant to expect to walk on the water like Jesus, but there’s that human side to all of us. Jesus knows that and loves us anyway. Jesus invites Peter out onto the sea, “Come.” Peter steps out of the security of the boat and indeed walks on the water toward Jesus. But in the moment that he takes his focus off of Jesus and turns his attention to the strong wind, Peter is overcome with fear and begins to sink. He cries out for help, “Lord, save me.” Jesus is right there, reaching out a strong arm to pull Peter out of the troubling water.

Peter loses his focus. He takes his eyes off of Jesus. He wants to be just like Jesus, but he allows his attention to wander elsewhere. That’s when he begins to sink.

Diogenes Allen has said, “We become what we attend to.” We are shaped by that to which we give our attention. If we attend to the chaos

around us, our lives will be chaotic. If we focus our awareness on Jesus, we will become like Jesus. While Peter has his attention focused on Jesus, he can do anything; he can walk on water. But the second that Peter turns his concentration to the obstacles, he begins to sink. We become what we attend to. When we keep our focus on Jesus, we can do anything. We can walk across the stormy seas of our lives to a more peaceful place. When we take our eyes off Jesus, mindful only of our personal and corporate anxieties, we begin to sink.

The Quaker understanding of the Light, or the presence of God within, can be helpful as we try to act faithfully in the face of our fears. When we fear a particular situation, question, or decision, we might pray silently, “Turn to the Light.” This simple prayer shifts the focus from our fear to the Light of faith. We can choose to let the fear permeate our mindset and actions, or we can move into the graciousness of the Light.

In turning toward the Light, we turn our eyes upon Jesus. We focus on the love of God. As love increases, fear decreases. As the Bible says, “Perfect love casts out fear.” Faith conquers fear.

This is true for us as we traverse our personal storms through chaotic seas. It can also be true for us corporately. When we live in fear of one another, we forgo tolerance and often compassion. When we live in the light of God’s love, we will find renewed hope that the diverse peoples of the world can live together in understanding, unity, and peace. We become what we attend to. When we focus on the chaos, we become the chaos. When we turn our attention to Jesus, we become like Jesus and we can impact wholesome change in our corner of the world. We remember that God is walking toward us in love, even through the chaotic sea. God is at work in the world, doing something that we cannot fully see nor even imagine.

Whenever we find ourselves traversing the storms of life, we will also be able to find Jesus walking toward us in love, reaching out with a helping hand, coming to offer us a peaceful presence. May our fears be conquered by faith and the love of God.

¹ John McCutcheon, "Phobias," *Family Garden* (Cambridge, Mass.: Rounder Records Corp., 1993).

² *Journey into Freedom*, March 2002.

³ John S. Mogabgab, *Weavings*, March/April 1999, p. 2.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church