

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: June 20, 2021. Year B 4th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 4:35-41

Title: Fear and Faith

Focus: Rather than be stuck or overwhelmed by fear (or anxiety), how can we in trusting faith bring our fears or the storms we face into the presence of God?

Gospel reading: Mark 4:35-41

³⁵When evening had come, [Jesus said to the disciples,] “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But 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?” ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹And 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

What’s the connection, do you think, between fear and faith? What’s the relationship between the two?

- Is it, for instance, all one and none of the other?
 - As in, if you have faith, then you will not be afraid.
 - Or, on the other side of it, if you are afraid, then that fear drives out faith and so you are characterized by fear or driven by fear and you have no faith.

The question about the relationship between fear and faith is prompted by today’s reading from Mark chapter 4.

Jesus and the Disciples in the Boat

³⁵ On that day, [That same day told throughout chapter 4—Jesus was tired from ministering to people all 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?**"

Let’s stop there before continuing. . .

- One thing I recently said about what you might call the narrative or storytelling style of Mark is that he (Mark) or it (his narrative) is action-oriented and quick to the point without a lot of detail. That description is true here: In just one verse, the ferocity of the storm is succinctly summarized:
 - ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.
 - In just one verse, Mark has described the storm, how quickly it has come up, its severity, and its impact.

Remember that among these disciples were fishermen. Their livelihood depended on being on the water and casting nets and reading the weather conditions. They were experienced and they were afraid. That would suggest that we should not downplay the severity of the storm. 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 overreacted; this is no common storm.

So, what's Jesus doing during this time? He's sleeping in the back of the boat. Remember, the crowd had been following Jesus. He was the one who, at the beginning of this passage, said to the disciples, "let us go across to the other side" and they left the crowd behind (vv. 35-36).

And did you hear how the disciples address him—what they say and how they likely said it.

They woke him up and said to him, **"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"**

In some ways, calling Jesus "teacher" (v. 38) sounds so formal, but clearly it had to have been spoken in alarm. Plus, it's an odd way to pose a question likely spoken with terror: "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

- It's spoken or written as a question, but it's more like a passive-aggressive accusation and demand:
 - "You don't care about us!"
 - Maybe even, "Get off your stupid pillow and do something!"
 - And, in their panic, they've already determined how the story is going to turn out: "We are perishing!"

When the disciples wake Jesus, accusing him of indifference or negligence, they have lost hope; their words reveal that they have already figured out how the story must end.

This is such a brief, powerful interaction between Jesus and the disciples.

- They say **"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"**

- After he calms the sea and winds **He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"**

Fear and Faith:

Yes, fear lurks just under the surface of a lot of the difficult moments in our lives.¹

And that's where our opening question comes into play again: **What's the relationship between fear and faith?** And, to ask it more pointedly, is it unfaithful to be fearful?

Notice Jesus' sharp words to his disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Ouch!

So, what do you think: is Jesus equating fear with lack of faith?

- That rigid conclusion would be troubling. . .
- I think that fear is a response to a situation. It can be a good and necessary response that has a role in protecting us from danger. Fear is a signal that we need to be attentive to in order to respond.
 - And maybe that's just the point—that fear should be accompanied by a response—because if we're stuck in fear or paralyzed by it, then we are harmed by it.

At the same time, don't you think that there is a connection between fear and a lack of faith?

Let's look at it this way: Think of faith primarily as trust, not simply as belief (as in just acknowledging something—called *cognitive assent*), but the kind of trust that motivates you to action. For example, you only let people you trust watch your kids when they're little. Does that make sense? Faith is trust.

Well, when we're afraid, we have a really, really hard time trusting. Fear paralyzes, making trusting -- and the confident action that trust makes possible -- very difficult, if not impossible.

So maybe the issue isn't that the disciples are understandably afraid because of the storm, it's that they allowed their fear to overtake them so that they don't come to Jesus and say, "Teacher, we need your help," but rather come already assuming the worst, "Teacher, don't you care that we're dying." This isn't a trusting or faithful request; it's a fear-induced accusation.

Keep in mind, of course, that whatever the quality of their interaction with Jesus, he still calms the sea. He does care for them. He does look out for them. You don't have to have perfect faith for God to respond; indeed, you can even be paralyzed by fear,

¹ David Lose, "Faith and Fear" *Dear Working Preacher* column posted June 17, 2012. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/faith-and-fear>

assume the worst about God, and still receive God's mercy and grace...and then, perhaps, an invitation to greater faith!

Interestingly, their fear doesn't evaporate with the stilling of the sea, but it is transformed from the paralyzing anxiety that assumes the worst to a kind of holy awe at the presence and power of the One in their midst. They thought they knew Jesus, and now they have to wonder if they really did. I think that's the invitation for us as well: to bring our fears, anxieties, and concerns to God as best we can and watch as they are transformed and we are amazed once again at this God who never, ever ceases to surprise us.

Symbolism of Boats and Storms

There is symbolic weight to this story:

- A boat is an ancient symbol for the church. There are church denominations and church groups which have a boat as a part of their logo identifying who they are.



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- The symbol is meant to convey the safety or security the Church offers in the midst of the storms of life.
 - The main seating area in a church sanctuary is called the *nave*. This comes from the Latin word for ship, *navis*, and for boat, *navicula*.

Expressing Faith while Experiencing Fear

To summarize this, I believe we can get stuck in fear. I believe that we can be paralyzed by fear and respond out of that fear alone.

I also believe that we can experience fear and still express faith.

I'm going to offer two examples of not allowing fear to cause people to get stuck. (I could come up with many others)—one is from scripture from another place in Mark and one is an example of faith from a “saint” from the life of Good Shepherd whom many of you know.

The Four Faithful Friends: Mark 2:1-12 (NRSV)

²When [Jesus] returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it,

they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

- They brought him to Jesus.
- The story doesn't say that these four friends said anything to Jesus. They didn't petition him in a specific way. I wonder what they were thinking when they set out. As they walked along the way, what were they rehearsing in their heads about what they would say? As it turns out, at least as Mark tells the story, they said nothing; they simply presented their friend to Jesus.
- They were persistent, even when the gathered crowd could have prevented them from seeing Jesus.
- Jesus saw their faith (v. 5).

The Faith of Marilyn Ebner, as shared by daughter-in-law Ann Ebner.

Just two weeks ago, we held a memorial service here at Good Shepherd giving thanks to God for the life of Marilyn Ebner. I was touched by a story shared during the service by Ann, Marilyn's daughter-in-law, son Greg's wife. And I have her permission to share this story with you. . .

Early in their married life, Greg was diagnosed with cancer. As I recall, Ann told me they were in their late 20s. Greg was going to travel to Southern California to be treated at UCLA and his mother Marilyn and wife Ann went with him.

This is where the question, "What's the relationship between fear and faith?" is addressed in the most practical terms. You can imagine that a person diagnosed with cancer, along with his or her family, is going to experience fear. That's just a natural response to the uncertainty of one's circumstance and the expected difficulty of one's treatment. I'm sure Greg and Ann and Marilyn and others were afraid. But Ann described the faith she saw Marilyn display in the midst of that fear.

From Ann:

I also learned about her very real faith in God on that trip. We attended meetings of a support group for women whose husbands or sons were receiving cancer treatment at UCLA. The chaplain and social worker who led the group asked how their loved ones' cancer had impacted their religious faith. There was so much anger in that room. Several women blamed God and said they had lost their faith. I remember watching Marilyn's face and her increasingly bewildered look. When her turn came, she said very kindly but very surely that she did not feel that way herself. She said "I don't think God caused Greg to get cancer! I think cancer and other bad things happen in our lives, but that God is not punishing us and making those things happen." She said rather she felt God's support and love as we tried to navigate and pass through that hard challenging time.

My impressions of Ann's comments and Marilyn's example:

Ann spoke of the cancer support group and the mutual sharing of how people made sense of their circumstance and interpreted God's presence in their life. My impression was that Marilyn was gracious and respectful as she listened to others' stories. She understood their circumstance as it mirrored her own with Greg.

And yet she was also clear in expressing her own assurance of faith. I think her quiet respect for others heightens my appreciation for her--it's not as though she was saying, "You all are wrong. . ." but her faith was authentic to her, and she displayed that.

Who is this Jesus?

Remember that we are in chapter 4 of Mark. In the trajectory of Jesus' ministry and time with the disciples, it is still early. They may think that they have known him and now they may wonder if they really did.

As this part of the story comes to a close, the text, as translated in the NRSV, says,

"⁴¹And they were filled with great awe."

In Greek, it's literally, "They feared a great fear."

And they said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

The wonder, amazement, or awe of the disciples is a moment of invitation to us as well:

- "To bring our fears, anxieties, and concerns to God as best we can and watch as they are transformed and we are amazed once again at this God who never, ever ceases to surprise us."²

² Insight from David Lose (writing in 2012 for *Working Preacher*)