

Sunday, June 23, 2024
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7B)

1 Samuel 17.32-49; Mark 4.35-41

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1184662055998498>

(Sermon begins at about 27:35)

“Why Are You Afraid?”

In his first inaugural address in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Perhaps the disciples in today’s Gospel lesson could benefit from those words. After all, they are overcome with fear. No wonder, as they are presented with fear on multiple fronts. Fears that seem to compound as the story progresses.

It all starts with a little getaway across the Sea of Galilee following a long day of ministry—a much-needed time away for Jesus and the disciples to rest before heading on to the next gig. All of a sudden, “a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.” The disciples are starting to panic. Although I wonder about the disciples freaking out the way they do: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Now, of course, being buffeted by a storm would be cause for a little concern, to say the least. But this would not have been anything that unusual for the disciples. At least four of them were fishermen, making their living on this very sea. The Sea of Galilee is known for its unpredictable weather patterns, with storms whipping up unexpectedly. Surely, they had encountered such conditions before. Surely, they knew what to do, what actions to take to protect themselves and their boat. Although, truth be told, we don’t know how bad the storm really was. It may well have been the mother of all storms, of a magnitude unlike anything they had ever seen. In which case, the fear and the level of freak-out may have been justified. So maybe we can cut the disciples a little slack.

As if to add insult to injury, Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat, seemingly oblivious to the storm raging around him and the fear raging amongst his disciples. But then, when the disciples wake up Jesus and he rebukes the wind and the sea and the storm calms down, they are even more freaked out. They are even more fearful. As we are told, “And they were filled with great awe.” They weren’t in awe. They were scared out of their wits. The more accurate translation of the original text is not that they were filled with “a great awe,” but rather that they were “fearful of a great fear.” A very different, and far more serious, implication.

What would cause this being “fearful of a great fear?” The disciples are fearful in the wake of Jesus calming the storm. But why? Well, there is the obvious, that calming a storm simply by rebuking the wind and the sea is not something a normal human being can do with success. Such action on Jesus’ part merely adds to the confusion and uncertainty about who this Jesus is. We need to remember that the disciples are still getting to know Jesus and what he is capable of. This scene takes place early in Jesus’ public ministry. It hasn’t been that long since he called the Twelve to be his disciples. They have only been with him a short time. They have only witnessed his abilities on a couple of occasions. In those, he has done some pretty spectacular

things. He has cast out demons. He has healed the sick and infirm. And now this: calming the stormy sea by merely saying “Peace! Be still!” They ask themselves, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” Only God is capable of such miraculous acts. No wonder they are “fearful of a great fear.” They are starting to realize just who this Jesus might be. Of whom they have signed on to follow. Undoubtedly, the wheels start spinning as they process what is going on and start to realize the broader implications. The implications of who this is, and by extension, the potential implications to them for being associated with Jesus.

No wonder the disciples are freaking out all over the place. Their imaginations are working overtime as they consider the physical danger they are in because of the storm, as well as the uncertainty of what it means to be associated with someone with such mysterious and unusual capabilities as this Jesus. Mysteries and capabilities that continue to be revealed. What could possibly be next? So, yeah, the disciples are entitled to their fear. Namely, fear at the uncertainties they face on a number of fronts. Not only in the present moment, but also what they might face if they survive their current predicament.

In response to the mountain of fears besetting his disciples, Jesus says, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Of course, this is more of a rhetorical question. It would have been obvious why they were afraid. And as to faith, well, as we’ve established, they are still new at this disciple thing. They are still learning to trust and have faith in Jesus. With each lesson, that faith increases. With each experience of Jesus and his capabilities, that faith grows stronger. And this current situation is a huge lesson for them. It will go a long way in the development of their faith.

Of course, it’s easy for Jesus to question why they are fearful. He can see the bigger picture. He knows they will be okay. But in the thick of it, they haven’t reached that point yet. After all, the natural reaction to threats is heightened fear—part of the instinctive fight or flight response. As a contemporary of Jesus, the Stoic philosopher Seneca wrote, “we suffer more often in imagination than in reality.” Meaning that when we are confronted with a fearful situation, or more aptly, when we anticipate a situation, we more often than not get ourselves all worked up and anticipate the worst. Then, what actually happens is, more often than not, not nearly as bad as we had built it up to be in our own imaginations. The imagined fear being worse than what comes to pass; our angst and suffering because of the imagined fear being far worse than reality.

Of course, in that swamped boat on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus steps in and saves the day. In so doing, the disciples begin to realize the extraordinary things Jesus is capable of. Their initial faith in Jesus that led them to agree to follow him is being substantiated with each succeeding experience. While still bemused and confused, their faith is growing, helping to push aside the fear, little by little. As such, the take-away from today’s Gospel is that fear does not have the last word. That with ever increasing faith in Jesus, the disciples are realizing that they are not alone; that with him, with God’s strength, they have what they need to face any situation. As their lives of faith continue to grow, as their firsthand experiences of Jesus as the Son of Man continue, they will be able to live more fully into this assurance that in Jesus and in God, fear does not have the last word.

This is borne out throughout scripture. “Why are you afraid?” “Do not fear” “Do not be afraid.” Such sentiments are constant refrains throughout both the Old and New Testaments alike. Certainly, when someone is confronted with something otherworldly, such as an angelic messenger. But at other times as well, when someone is presented with instructions or a teaching or a call to action that on first glance may seem to be difficult or dangerous or potentially frightening. In all cases, seeking to provide assurance to the hearer. And often carrying the message, be it explicit or implicit, that God is with them. That they need not fear precisely because God is with them.

In some cases, we see situations of fearlessness on the part of an individual because of certainty in God’s presence. A profound faith that with God, there is no need to fear. We see this clearly demonstrated in the actions of young David in our Old Testament reading. This is the well-known story of David and Goliath. A young shepherd boy taking on a Philistine giant, who, based on the measurements recorded, was nine feet nine inches tall.

While not part of what we heard today, the backstory is that Goliath has issued a challenge to Israel. They are to pick a champion who will fight Goliath. To the death. Whoever wins will determine who wins the overall war between the Israelites and the Philistines. As we heard in the reading from First Samuel, David goes to King Saul and volunteers to take on Goliath. Saul tries to dissuade David, arguing “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.” In other words, “there is no way you can survive such a fight.” Yet, David is undeterred. He responds, “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them.”

Words of youthful bravado? Not in this case. David’s motivation is one solidly rooted in faith. A faith that allays, if not banishes, any semblance of fear that he might be feeling about taking on a seasoned warrior nearly twice his size. As he tells Saul, his willingness to undertake such a daunting, even fool-hardy, mission is because of his devotion to God: because the Philistines and Goliath personally have “defied the armies of the living God.” David goes on to tell Saul, “The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.” David is not fearful because of his previous experiences with dangerous situations—he knows what he is capable of. But even more so, because he trusts in the Lord to protect him. A trust borne out of and repeatedly substantiated by previous experiences of God’s protection. And, of course, David’s faith serves him well. He prevails against Goliath.

Fear is a natural response to dangerous or threatening situations. Fear is a natural response to the unknown. For many of us, it is perhaps this latter category of fears that are most prevalent in our lives. While always a possibility, for the most part we do not normally worry too much about the possibility of natural disasters, catastrophic weather, wild animal attacks, or enemy invasions. Our fears more often stem from anticipation of more personal threats: uncertainties regarding aging, health, finances, relationships, a difficult situation, etc. Our fears are unique to us and to our life’s circumstances. As are our individual responses to our fears.

Just because we are people of faith does not mean that we will not have any fears. Even those closest to Jesus had their fears. But being people of faith does mean that fear does not have the last word. It does mean that we are not alone when it comes to dealing with and facing our fears. We are continually assured by our Lord that he is with us, even in the midst of our fears. Especially in the midst of our fears. That he is there to help dispel the fears we face. That he is there to help us through whatever situation may cause us to fear.

Whenever fears arise, know that Jesus is there, ready to ask, "Why are you afraid?" Not as a criticism, but as a gentle reminder that fear does not have the last word. He does. And that word to whatever situation may cause our fears, that word to us in moments of fear, is always "Peace! Be still!"