

"Peace, Be Still" – Mark 4:35-41 – June 24, 2018

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For children, fear can be a very powerful emotion. Kids learn at a young age that there are things in this world that cause us fear. Monsters in the closet, or under the bed, or hiding in the dark places. As a child one ritual that I always completed before going to bed was to check to make sure that my closet door was completely shut. Even when I got old enough to understand rationally that there was absolutely nothing in the closet that would come get me in the middle of the night, I still checked the closet door. Fear, as I learned early on, defies rationality.

Now, we adults have grown past our fear of monsters. Certainly, some of us may harbor phobias of spiders, snakes, bats, or rats. Many of us still don't like things that are creepy and crawly, and perhaps those phobias are linked back to our monster-fearing days or to a particularly bad experience with said creature. People who were once attacked by a dog may still harbor a certain level of apprehension when confronted by any canine.

But we have other fears besides phobias. We fear uncertainty, the unknown. We are afraid of illness or the approach of death – whether ours or someone close to us. We become anxious when we lose a job or when our bills exceed our income. We become nervous when a relationship has taken a downward spiral, and we wonder if we can survive being alone. We may fear our own vulnerability, wondering if we will be the victim of a crime or be taken advantage of by someone else. We can even fear people simply because they are different from us – different color skin, different language, different sexual orientation. We often have many reasons for why we fear other people – such as we fear losing our identity, our privilege in society or, if we hold a mindset of scarcity, we fear having to share what we believe are limited resources.

Many of the things we fear have to do with our lack of control. We live in a scary world where disease, violence, disaster and tragedy often occur with little warning and beyond our ability to safely flee the destruction that often results. Things happen. And we fear not being in control of the world around us. And people who are afraid often act in non-rational or unhealthy ways in order to gain control of situations.

In our New Testament lesson from Mark's gospel, we have a simple story about fear. Prior to this story, Jesus had been teaching the crowds all day long. Night had arrived, and clearly it was time for a break. Jesus suggested they take a little boat trip across the Sea of Galilee. Knowing that he had at least four experienced fisherman with him in the boat, Jesus had no trouble making himself comfortable in the stern and falling asleep.

Not long after, a storm popped up on the sea. Apparently, this was no typical storm, for the fishermen, used to such things, were surprisingly at loss as to what to do. The boat began to fill with water, and the powerful winds caused the waves crash against it. The disciples of Jesus began to panic and fear for their lives. They didn't know what to do. Furthermore, they were astonished that Jesus was able to sleep through this disaster. Having witnessed the power of Jesus to cure illness and exorcise demons, the disciples shook Jesus awake, believing that he could possibly do something to save them from certain death.

They rebuked him, saying, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" How could he remain so oblivious to their pressing need? Why is Jesus sleeping though the tragedy? His ability to remain relaxed and calm stands in sharp contrast to the terror of the disciples. The fear is overwhelming, and God is unmindful of my distress. Do you not care? My life is spiraling out of control, the situation is too much for me to handle, the worry is overwhelming, all these things are happening TO me, against my will – Don't you care?

Jesus awoke, quickly assessed the situation, stood up and rebuked the wind and calmed the sea. And the storm abated. Jesus turned to his disciples and questioned them, "Why are you afraid?" Why do you fear the storms of life and the unexpected tragedies? And again the answer is, because we have no control over them. We want control.

Ever since my teenage years, I have been a fan of Star Trek. If you are at all familiar with the world of Star Trek you've probably heard of the Kobayashi Maru test. During their training at the Academy, all Star Fleet command candidates must take the Kobayashi Maru test. This test is a simulation, where the cadet serves in the role of captain of a starship that receives a distress call from another ship, the Kobayashi Maru. This ship is in dire trouble and is about to self-destruct.

The main problem is that this other ship is located in the Neutral Zone, an area of space that is completely off limits. If the cadet captain chooses to enter the Neutral Zone to save the Kobayashi Maru, he or she risks starting a war. If he or she chooses not to intervene, the crew and passengers of the Kobayashi Maru will die. It is a no-win scenario, but the cadets who are taking the test do not know that. Each one tries to save the ship or turns away. And each one ultimately fails.

Young James T. Kirk is a cadet who refuses to give up. After failing the test twice, he decides to give it another go. On the third time, he confidently issues the order to go into the Neutral Zone and save the Kobayashi Maru. The other cadets look at him in surprise. Sirens begin to blare, crew members are in a panic all around, but Kirk calmly sits in the captain's chair, munching on an apple. Not a hint of fear or panic. Why? Prior to taking the exam, he hacked into the computer system and changed the test, making it winnable. Kirk becomes the first cadet to ever pass the test. He later states, "I do not believe in a no-win scenario." Kirk doesn't like to lose. Ever.

Now the purpose of this test wasn't about winning or losing. The purpose of the test was to see how these young cadets would respond in the face of fear and overwhelming odds. How would they handle situations in which there was no way out? How would they respond when the situation was completely beyond their control? And James T. Kirk couldn't handle that.

James T. Kirk couldn't handle not being in control. And while that may be a great quality in a starship captain and provide an interesting story line in Hollywood, the reality is, life is full of no-win scenarios. We all face them, and the question Jesus asks his disciples in the boat is a question he asks each one of us? Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?

The first question is easier to understand than the second one. We are afraid because things occur in this world over which we have no control. The second question is harder to interpret. Jesus asks,

Have you still no faith? What does Jesus mean by that? And this is where we need to be careful in interpreting this passage.

On the surface, it appears that he might mean that if they had faith, he would be able to calm all the storms in their lives. That if one simply has enough faith, the bad things will go away. Some preachers teach this. Some churches believe this. Like faith is some magic wand...if we just pray harder and believe more, then Jesus will swoop in like Captain James T. Kirk to save the day. If we simply had enough faith, we'd never have to face the no-win scenario.

But we know this isn't true. We know by experience. How many of us faithful people have prayed for healing that never came. Or a positive resolution to a situation. Or the reversal of a tragedy. We pray for a happy, healthy marriage and the marriage fails. We pray for a cure, and the disease wins in the end. We pray for a new job, any job, but the bills continue to pile up and we find ourselves getting buried in debt.

So then, why did Jesus specifically calm the storm in this passage? This is where we need to look at the story in its context within the gospel of Mark. The disciples are still unsure of who Jesus is. They know he can do things – he can heal and exorcise demons. He can teach and bring life to the scriptures. But they aren't really sure who he is. And so in his gospel, Mark is showing them and us the identity of Jesus a little bit at a time. By calming the storm, by using his voice to command the power of nature, Jesus is showing himself to be God. This image reminds the readers of this gospel of the God of Genesis who created all of nature through the spoken word.

God commands nature. Jesus commands nature. So the question really is, have you still no faith in who I am? This is much different than saying that Jesus will come in and fix everything that is wrong in our lives if we simply have enough faith. What he is saying is, have faith that I am your God. I am here beside you, in the midst of the storm. I walk with you, you are never alone, and you needn't fear anything, because I am here. Throughout the entire storm, Jesus was right there with them in the boat.

Jesus' very presence calms our fears in the face of those difficult times. Somehow, having the faith, believing that he is with us, gives us the strength and the courage to face what frightens us.

I remember a conversation that I once had with my oncologist. At the time, four of us on the staff at Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis had breast cancer and we all had the same oncologist. She made an interesting observation. She commented that she had been amazed witnessing the four of us throughout our cancer treatments. She is in the business of having to deliver scary news on a daily basis to lots of women and their families. She is accustomed to tears and lots of fearfulness. But as patients, she said, the four of us from Second have been remarkably calm throughout our journeys. I laughed and said that it is because we are Presbyterian – we do things decently and in order.

But in reality, it's because of our faith. I had had many conversations with my colleagues, and we all had experienced plenty of fear throughout our experiences of cancer. Questions that caused sleepless nights. Concerns that weighed us down. But each one of us had faith. Faith that no matter

what might happen; no matter what prognosis we received – we did not walk alone in this. Christ walked alongside us, even as our colleague Betty ended her cancer journey in death.

That is the faith that Jesus is talking about in this passage from Mark. He asks us, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Do you not realize that even in the darkest moments of your life, you are never alone? In the face of your fear, I am with you. Always.