

"Between Fear and Faith" – Matthew 14:22-33 – August 9, 2020

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

Following the event of the feeding of the crowd with the Loaves and Fishes, Jesus told his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee. He would disperse the crowds then take some alone time to pray. During the night, a fierce wind buffeted them on the sea. In the early morning, already exhausted from the storm, the men became terrified when they spotted a shadowy figure coming toward them above the waves. They cried out in fear, but a voice called back to them, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

An important theme throughout Matthew's gospel is that Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us." Matthew's church community was experiencing fear and relentless persecution, living in what seemed to be a storm of trials and uncertainty. So Matthew wanted to remind them that Jesus comes to them in the middle of the storm. Christ is present in the storm; he is Emmanuel. Even when things are at their worst, and fear seems to take over, Jesus is "God with us."

Jesus identifies himself to them, using the words "it is I" or literally "I am." The same words used as the name of God given to Moses. The early church would have understood that reference. And Jesus tells them to not be afraid. The message being that Jesus stand with us in life's storms, so there is no need to fear.

Unfortunately, fear is not rational. When fear grips us, no amount of logic can send it on its way. In the midst of pandemic, we are assaulted by numerous concerns. These stresses can easily lead to feelings of fear and loss of control. Fear left unchecked can become paralyzing or overwhelming.

Fear has its place. In the face of extreme danger, it tells us to head for the hills. I imagine that for our long ago ancestors it was especially helpful. See big lion or tiger. Experience gut wrenching fear. Receive adrenaline rush to the brain. Take off running in the opposite direction. So fear is an instinctual reaction to those things that are a threat to our well-being.

I can understand the fear of the disciples in the boat. Their defenses were already down, having confronted a raging storm all night. And now out of the darkness appeared a shadowy figure taking a stroll on the violent sea. I get that. Now what I don't get, is what happens next.

Peter comes forward and says, "Okay, Lord, if that's really you, command me to come out there to you on the sea." What is he doing? What is he thinking? He's not really certain if it is in fact Jesus out there. But instead of just waiting in the relative safety of the boat, to see what might happen next, he shouts out – "Hey, if that's you Jesus, tell me to join you in the middle of the storm!"

Let's think about what Jesus said. He didn't say, "Hang on, I'll be right there." Nor did he rebuke Peter for being impetuous. He simply said, "Come on." So, Peter hopped out of the boat and began walking on the sea toward Jesus. Things were going all right as long as he kept his focus directly on Jesus. Yet the wind was howling around him. The storm was still raging. Peter got distracted. His focus wavered. His fear took over. And he began to sink. He was faced with two rival possibilities: Jesus or the chaos of the storm. His faith became mixed with his fear. He was unsure of which would prevail in the end, and so he began to sink.

For Peter this moment was one of both weakness and strength. He had his doubts, but he wanted to believe. He was afraid, but chose to step outside the safety of the boat. He began his

walk with his focus on Jesus, but became distracted by the violent winds. Even as he started to sink, he called out with confidence, "Lord, save me!" Peter was stuck in the middle of fear and faith. But at that very moment, Jesus reached out to Peter and caught him. And then Jesus chided him a bit, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

What does Jesus mean by this? Could Peter have continued to walk on the sea if his faith had been stronger? No, see that's not the point. This story isn't about walking on water. Humans were not meant to walk on water. Besides Peter's name means "rock." Rocks sink, they don't float. Remember this truth - our depth of faith doesn't influence the world around us. When we start defining faith in this manner we begin to think if we had had more faith, such and such wouldn't have happened, and that leads us dangerously close to a type of works righteousness. If I had just prayed more, if I had just believed with all my heart, and so on. Faith isn't some magic formula for getting things to go our way.

No, this story is about faith in Jesus in the midst of our fear. Faith that Jesus really is Emmanuel, God with us. When Peter doubted, his focus moved from Jesus to the chaos that surrounded him. His attention wavered. And suddenly he was engulfed by his fear. He cried out for Jesus to save him, and Jesus was right there, just an arm length away.

Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt? Doubt – to waver, to vacillate, to distrust. When we doubt we lose our focus on Jesus alone. Well, I don't think very many of us can ever say that we are completely focused on Jesus and Jesus alone. Hence the phrase, "you of little faith." In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses the words "you of little faith" only in reference to his disciples. He's not talking about the people who don't believe in him. He's referring to the ones closest to him. So even the ones who should really "get it" don't really "get it." To be a disciple then means to struggle, to ask questions, to waver, to misunderstand, to fear, and then to learn to start all over again.

Do we really believe that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us? In our Presbyterian, cerebral and rational faith, we may be able to proclaim an emphatic yes. But when the worries of the world begin to close in around us, when the pandemic seems to be going on forever, when we hear of people getting sick even when they did everything right, when we are worried about the security of our jobs or the safety of our kids in school, it is easy to find our minds wavering from the faith that tells us that Jesus is right there with us. We are all stuck in the middle of fear and faith.

But then Jesus dragged Peter into the boat with the other disciples, and the waves began to lessen, the wind ceased its ferocious blowing. The world around them was once again calm. Jesus was there, their fear became relief, and they worshipped him.

Jesus has sent us out into the world, and it can be and often is, a fearsome place. Like Peter we have a choice. We can become distracted by the fears that beset us and then sink beneath their weight into the dark and stormy chaos of a raging sea. Or we can keep our eyes focused upon our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us the strength to weather any storm. But there's a third choice also. Much of the time we find ourselves stuck somewhere in the middle, wavering between faith and fear. When this occurs, and it will, Jesus has promised to be Emmanuel, God with us, and so when we cry out in terror, Lord save me, we'll find that he is only an arm length away.