

Rightly Placed Fear

Luke 8:22-25

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 27, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²² One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side of the lake.” So they put out, ²³ and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. ²⁴ They went to him and woke him up, shouting, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵ He said to them, “Where is your faith?” They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?” (Luke 8:22-25, NRSV)

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What are you afraid of? Every one of us has a phobia or two, some of them odd. I'm afraid of rodents, and heights, and boy bands. What about you?

Here are a couple of common and not-so-common phobias. See if you can identify them.

Arachnophobia? The fear of spiders, which affects women four times more than it affects men.

Thanatophobia? The fear of death. Glossophobia? The fear of public speaking. Did you know, by the way, that more people are afraid of public speaking than are afraid of death, which means that many people, when they go to a funeral, would prefer to be the one in the casket rather than the one giving the eulogy!¹

What about alektorophobia? The fear of chickens. It exists apparently.

Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia? The fear of long words. I'm not making this up. Phobophobia? The fear of fear. You're afraid of the very possibility of being afraid. Where does that one ever end?

Triskaidekaphobia. The fear of the number 13.

Coulrophobia? The fear of clowns, which is perfectly normal because clowns are creepy. Ergophobia? The fear of work. Also more commonly known as...laziness.

Pewaphobia? The fear of long, boring sermons. Some of you are experiencing that phobia in this very moment!²

Seriously, though, what do you fear in life? What makes you anxious, keeps you up at night, even causes you dread? Think about that question. I'm going to ask you again later.

As we pick up our journey through Luke this morning we have come to a section of the Gospel which includes four stories about Jesus performing miraculous signs. In each instance Jesus encounters something in this world that people greatly fear and, through the power that only belongs to him as the Son of God, he overcomes each. First it's nature, than evil, than illness, and finally death. In the first story this morning we look at Jesus' encounter with nature, specifically nature in the form of a violent storm.

The story begins like this: **“One day Jesus got into a boat with his disciples...”** Literally, the original text reads, “On one of the days...” In other words, this is just an ordinary day, no more special than any other ordinary day. Might have been a Tuesday morning. And yet, on this ordinary day these ordinary disciples are going to encounter on this ordinary lake in this ordinary boat the revelation of the Living God in an extraordinary way. And the takeaway here is that the same can happen to us. Do you believe that? Will you wake up this Tuesday morning with the expectation that you might encounter the supernatural revelation of the Living God in some extraordinary way that ordinary day? If not, you might need to readjust your expectations. That's one of the lessons of this story.

So as they all climb into this boat on this ordinary morning Jesus tells his disciples, **“Let us go across to the other side of the lake.”** Notice, no other instructions are offered. No reason is given for the trip. No hint of what is to come on their journey across the lake. No polling of the disciples to see if the plan has a consensus of support. And yet the text tells us, **“So they put out...”** It's a simple detail I don't want you to miss. Jesus tells his disciples what to do and, without probably really understanding all the reasons behind the command, the disciples simply obey and do what he says to do. It's the essence of discipleship, obedience to Jesus. Remember the seed in the good soil that produces fruit from the parable two weeks ago? That soil represents those who hear God's Word and act upon it, even (maybe especially!) in ordinary times like Tuesday mornings. A disciple is one who listens to what Jesus says and then does what Jesus says.

¹ Credit to Jerry Seinfeld for this humorous observation.

² See the full list of these fears and others, with descriptions, at <https://www.fearof.net/>

Here's a reproduction of the sort of boat they would have climbed into that day. Picture at least 13 of them in this boat, maybe more if some of the women disciples were with them, all making this eight mile journey across Lake Galilee. Imagine the width of Lake Tahoe. And as they begin the journey Jesus finds a place in the hull to lie down and sleep. It's a mundane detail, on the one hand, because many of his disciples are fisherman. They grew up on this lake and certainly don't need the help of a carpenter to sail across the water. So Jesus takes the opportunity to catch a nap.

On the other hand, this is an astonishing detail Luke records for us here because, remember, Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the very creator of the universe, sovereign Lord over all that has ever existed. And yet here he is so exhausted that he can't keep his eyes open and sleeps in the boat *even after the raging storm comes upon them!* It is these sorts of details in the Gospel accounts that have kept many, many people, including those of other religious traditions who want to honor Jesus only as a great teacher and prophet, from declaring that he is God. Because God doesn't get tired. God doesn't show this sort of weakness. God is not like us in these ways. And yet that is the clear testimony of the Gospel accounts, here and in a thousand other places. This is the incarnation in full display, the eternal God having come to take on human flesh with all its weaknesses and limitations, apart from sin.

Do you realize what good news this is? Our God knows what it's like to be exhausted, to hunger, to thirst, to feel pain, to experience loneliness and abandonment and betrayal, to hurt, to cry, to bleed, even to die. When you experience something hard in life, what a gift it is to be able to be with and talk with somebody who has gone through something similar. I was adopted as a child and know what it's like to wrestle with the idea that my birth parents, for whatever reason, let me go. And over the years it has been a gift for me to talk with others who have had that same experience of adoption. We understand one another and there can be healing in understanding. What an incredible thing it is, therefore, that when we pray we pray to One who has been exactly where we have been! God knows us intimately, in part because in Christ God has become one of us.

Of course, humanity is not all there is to Christ, as we are about to see.

Picking up the story, somewhere in the middle of their journey across the water a windstorm swept down on the lake. This was not uncommon in those days. Lake Galilee is 700 feet below sea level and surrounded by the walls of steep mountains. Over time, rivers have cut

deep ravines in the walls of those mountains which often act like funnels which draw down the cold winds from the higher elevations. In no time at all, violent storms can be whipped up at lake level. Apparently, one of these storms happened on that ordinary day and was so violent that, according to Luke, it began to fill the boat with water and put the entire group in danger.³

Naturally, the disciples are filled with fear. These men, at least some of them, know this lake well. No doubt they have personally known fisherman who got caught in one of these storms and never made it back to shore. Add to that the commonly held belief in the ancient world that large bodies of water were the abode of evil spirits⁴, and you can see why they all must have feared for their lives!

Still, it's interesting to me that Luke says in the text that they were in danger. Writing this account after the fact years later, I would expect him to say, "they *thought* they were in danger". Right? Because in retrospect Luke knows who it is that sleeps there in the boat and he knows how the story ultimately unfolds. But that's not what he says. So are they really in danger of drowning out there on the lake? Is that how this story is going to end? "And the disciples all drowned that day even though Jesus was with them. The end." I can't imagine. Still, he says they are in danger, which leads me to believe that maybe it's not the storm that is the real threat here. Maybe it's something else that has put them at risk in this moment. Keep that possibility in mind.

Well, as the boat begins to fill up with water they decide to wake up Jesus, who must have been one tired hombre to have slept through all this. "**Master, Master,**" they cry, "**we are perishing!**" It's a prayer, really. "Help us Lord! We are facing something here that is going to overwhelm us!" Some of us have prayed prayers like that before. Who has prayed a prayer like that before? Their prayer, however, lacks faith. And we know it lacks faith because later on Jesus says so. It's a prayer full of fear, not a prayer full of faith.

But in response, what does Jesus do? How does Jesus respond to their faithless prayer? He saves them. The text says, "**He woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a**

³ Joel Green, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, 1997), 332-333.

⁴ In Revelation 21:1 John's vision declares that in the coming Kingdom of Heaven "the sea will be no more." It's not a suggestion that there will be no ocean in the Kingdom, but that evil will be no more.

calm.” And all at once the thing which was about to overwhelm them is no more.

There is a truth here that is easy to miss which we must not miss. Why does Jesus save them? Have they earned it? Have they shown themselves worthy of his help? No. According to him they don't even have faith. They are lost. They have nothing to offer but their desperate cry of perishing. They are at the end of their resources. They don't wake Jesus up and say, "Listen, Master, we're in trouble here but we've got a plan and we need your help to pull it off." No. They believe they are about to drown and so have far more fear of the weather than they have faith in the one there in the boat who created the weather in the first place. And yet...and yet...Jesus saves them nonetheless. Can you see that what we have here is nothing but pure grace? It's pure grace!

Recently I've been reading Eric Metaxas' excellent biography of Martin Luther, the German monk who helped spark the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. God used Luther in so many ways to help reform the church, but the primary reform centered on this reality of God's grace. Luther himself regarded God's grace as the principal theological reality he was called to proclaim. For him it was the recovery of the very heart of the good news of the Christian Gospel, and the best conceivable news that we could ever receive from God.

In essence, grace is the idea that there is *absolutely nothing* we can ever do or offer to free ourselves from our sin and it's consequence of eternal death. It is Christ alone who has set us free from these storms which will otherwise surely drown us. Beyond that, Christ has set us free even before we had the faith to ask him to do so! We are under no obligation to do anything to save ourselves. Indeed, we *cannot save ourselves!* We can do nothing, offer nothing, prove nothing, assist with nothing.⁵ In Luther's own words, "God never gave to any person grace and everlasting life as a reward for merit. Those who seek to earn the grace of God by their own efforts are trying to please God with sins." All we can do ultimately is to place our faith in that which has already been completely accomplished for us by Christ.

Let me make this clear, and personal. This story is a parable of our lives. The great storm you face in your life is your sin and the death, both spiritual and physical, which will result from your sin. I know lots of us don't like the word 'sin', so choose another word if you must but don't lose the meaning of it. In each of us there exists, by nature, an insistence to live life on our

own terms and reject the God who has given us life in the first place. That is in you as it is in me. Though we ought to know better, we insist that we have within us the goodness that it takes and, in doing so, we make Christianity simply about doing good, about showing a good effort. But you cannot save yourself! You cannot! But God, in Christ, has saved you, has saved you before you even came to be. Did you ask Jesus to save you? Who here asked Jesus to give his life on the cross so that you could be forgiven? Nobody. It happened before you were born. Salvation is pure grace, motivated by a love we will never comprehend.

I think the problem is that very few people, even very few Christians, live each day in the fullness and freedom of this reality. Do you? Do you live each day in the reality that you are more sinful and flawed in yourself than you could ever dare believe, but that at the same time you are more loved and accepted by God in Christ than you could ever dare hope?⁶ Do you begin and end each day with a deep, abiding sense that you are God's beloved son or daughter for no other reason than the righteous sacrifice of Christ? If you do, if this faith is in you, then you know the freedom salvation brings because you know a love which leaves no room for fear. As 1 John 4:18 declares, **"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."**

You see, I think Luke was right in saying the disciples were in danger. They were in danger! But the threat was not the storm. Please! With a word from his mouth the very heavens and earth sprang into existence. This storm is nothing for God who is sleeping there in the boat. The real threat that faced these men and women was their fear because fear, at least this kind of fear, is the opposite of faith. Did you know that? Doubt is not the opposite of faith because faith can exist with doubt. I can have my doubts that the airplane will get me to my destination safely and yet still exercise enough faith in the face of my doubts to actually board the airplane. No, fear is the opposite of faith, not doubt.

The disciples were afraid, and that's why Jesus says to them, after he has saved them, **"Where is your faith?"** Notice, he doesn't ask, "Why don't you have faith?" No, he expects that they should have faith and wants to know where they left it. They have been following him long enough by now, watching him work in powerful and loving ways, that they should have had faith. Us too, right? Haven't most of us sitting here today had enough experience by now with Jesus, haven't we seen

⁵ Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther* (Viking, 2017), 366-367.

⁶ I'm paraphrasing a statement here made by Timothy Keller (source unknown).

him provide for us time and time again when we deserved nothing of the sort, that we now ought to have a level of faith in him and his love for us that casts out any fear of any circumstance in this world which is under his sovereignty?

So what do you fear? I asked you that question earlier and I hope you've had some time to think about it. What do you fear in this life? Let's name it, right now and right here. Do you fear some harm coming to your family? Do you fear for your kids or your grandkids? Or your marriage? Do you fear others seeing you for who you really are? Do you fear failure, not measuring up when all is said and done? Do you fear getting sick or getting old? Do you fear cancer? Do you fear death? Do you fear being alone? Do you fear not having enough, running out of resources? Do you fear where our country or our world seems to be heading? Do you fear being abandoned? Do you fear judgment? What storm is bearing down on you and causing you fear?

You know, there are some people who believe that this story of the miracle on the lake is a metaphor. Come on, Jesus didn't really calm the storm. That's ridiculous. What he likely did was calm the disciples. He knew just what to say to get them through the storm. That's what some people believe...and its garbage! More than that, it's heresy. So don't you believe it! Don't you believe anybody who tries to ever diminish the literal reality of the miracles of Christ as recorded in the Gospels, from the resurrection on down. Because if the incarnation is true, if Jesus really was the eternal God come to us in human flesh, than how can we have even the slightest difficulty accepting that the creator of the universe can at will control an afternoon storm on a lake, or remove the blindness in the eyes of an old man, or even reverse the death of friend buried four days earlier. Of course he can! He's God!

So listen to me! If this God who rules over all of existence not only loves you more profoundly than you can ever know, but has also saved you for himself even though there was nothing in you that made you deserve such salvation, then what *in the world* do you have to fear? Nothing! If your belonging to God is dependent on *your* goodness, on *your* achievement, on *your* accomplishment, on *your* effort, then yes, you should be afraid. For then God's love for you is conditional, and how can you ever know for certain if you have met the conditions? But if your sin has left nothing in you to merit God's favor and he *favours you nonetheless by grace*, can you then see how you are set free? And now since this one who loves you and has gone to death for you is in authority over all heaven and all earth, how can you be afraid of anything in heaven or earth!

I don't know how else to say it, when you fear what you fear in this world you demonstrate a lack of faith, either faith in God's love or faith in God's power. Remember, perfect love casts out fear. The danger is never in the thing that threatens us. The danger, rather, is that we will lack faith in the One who is greater than the thing that threatens us. At one point Jesus himself said, **"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."**⁷ Which, if you listen closely to what he says, means that if there's anything in this world that we should fear, it should be him.

Which brings us back to the incident on the lake. Did you notice how it ends? After Jesus rebukes his disciples for misplacing their faith, Luke tells us, **"They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?'"** They are no longer afraid of the storm. It's gone after all, the lake likely as smooth as glass. But they are still afraid, overcome by a fear that is full of amazement. Who wouldn't be? Who is this who commands even the winds and the water, and cancer and old age, and money and resources, and war and violence, and the future and the past, and even sin and death? Who is this?

Jesus knows your life better than you know your life. He has walked in your shoes. He knows your pain, your hunger, your heartache, your loneliness, your doubts, your weakness, your abandonment, your brokenness, your illness, your tears. He knows all of it because he has lived all of it himself. But Jesus is not only our comrade, a friend who can listen and bring comfort and empathy and a hug when we need it. He is one of us, but he is also, in some mysterious way we will never understand, the sovereign Lord of creation and the righteous Savior of the world. No one comes before him in his glory without bent knee and confessing tongue. It's why the scriptures tell us over and over that we are to fear the Lord. It's why Hebrews 10:31 declares, **"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."** Not in the terror-filled way we might fear drowning in a storm on a lake, but in an awe-struck way, a reverent way, a humility-filled way. For the Lord does not come to condemn us or destroy us, but to save and give life. Proverbs 9:10 declares, **"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."**⁸

So what do you fear? Name it today. What 'storm' or potential 'storm' in this life has left you fearful these

⁷ Matthew 10:28 (NRSV)

⁸ NIV

days? Are you willing to let Christ show you that such fear is rooted in faithlessness? If you trust that the One there with you through the storm is greater than the storm, and you also trust that by grace he has already saved you from the storm because he loves you, then where is there left any room for fear of the storm?

There is no room left for such fear, only a knee-bowing reverence that leads us also to ask aloud, "Who this is this, that he commands even the winds and the water?"

The question is for you to answer. Really! Today if possible. Who is this?

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 8:22-25 again. Pay attention to what catches your attention. What do you notice first?
2. Luke says in verse 23 that the disciples are in danger. Are they really in danger? If so, what is the threat, the storm or something else?
3. Jesus, seemingly upset, asks the disciples, "Where is your faith?" What does he mean? What does he expect their response to the storm should have been?
4. Why does Jesus save them from the storm? Is this grace at work here?
5. What do you fear in life? Name it and face it today.
6. When we fear things in this world (i.e. illness, the fate of our kids, financial insecurity, death, etc.), are we demonstrating a lack of faith? In other words, is fear the opposite of faith?
7. I John 4:18 declares, "**There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.**" Why is there no fear in love? What does this teach us about our relationship with God?
8. When all is said and done in this story the disciples do what the Bible often tells us to do, they fear the Lord. What does it mean to fear the Lord? Do you fear the Lord?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What are you afraid of in this world? Do you think that God wants you to be afraid? Why or why not?