

Be Not Afraid!
Matthew 14: 22-33
Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND
August 7, 2011
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Ps. 107 reads:

Some went down into the sea in boats . . .
then they cried out to God in their trouble,
and God delivered them from their distress;
God made the storm be still,
and the waves were hushed. (107: 23, 29)

It's late.

It's time to leave the crowd behind.
Jesus makes the disciples get into the boat.
That's not as simple as it sounds . . .

First of all, this has happened before

The last time, in chapter 8,
After a long day of being with people, and healing many at Capernaum
Jesus ordered the disciples into a boat
so they could go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.
A huge storm came up
the boat was being swamped by the waves
and Jesus kept sleeping.
When they woke him up, saying "Lord, save us!"
Jesus asked, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"
Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea;
and there was a dead calm.
And they arrived on the other side of the sea
in the country of the Gadarenes
near the capital of that Roman province

This time, they are not willing to go.

We hear: "he made the disciples get into the boat"
but the Greek text actually says Jesus *forces* them into the boat.
Now, it's no surprise that he has to force them –
Not only do they remember what happened the last time,
they know it's foolhardy to go out that late in the day,
because the Sea of Galilee is so large (13 mi long, 7 mi wide)
and so shallow (150 ft deep)
that it creates its own weather
and fierce storms typically come up on
in the late afternoon & in the evening.

Winds funnel through the mountains that surround the lake
and quickly stir up the water,
creating a deadly environment for anyone out on the sea
In March 1992 a storm whipped up and sent waves 10 feet high
crashing into downtown Tiberias and causing significant damage.
And even today, 2000 years after Jesus,
fishermen will not go out on the Sea after noon.

Now going out on the Sea of Galilee in the afternoon is bad enough,
but this time, Jesus is making them go alone, without him. while he stays behind.
Even worse, he's not just sending them out to sea alone,
he's sending them into foreign territory.
(We know this because "the other side"
is a phrase that means
"into the unknown"/"into foreign territory")

No wonder Jesus has to force the disciples into the boat!

Then Jesus goes away to pray on a mountain.
He's staying connected with and focused on God.

By evening, the boat is battered by the waves
And the winds have driven it far from the land.
Somehow the disciples get through the night.
It's been a very long night.
They have struggled against the wind all night long,
in the dark and in the chaos.
Apparently, they were so frightened that,
even though they knew Psalm 107,
they didn't cry out to God.
Meanwhile, Jesus knows where they are
and he does nothing.

Then, Matthew tells us, something happens "early in the morning."
He's giving us a clue here, because whenever you hear "early in the morning" in scripture
you know that something very frightening is going on . . .
The disciples are scared to death
when they see Jesus walking toward them on the sea.

Here Matthew has given us another clue!
Because anyone listening to this story knows that in the story of Job (9:8; 38:16)
God is the one who walks on the waters.
But the disciples don't "get it"; they don't understand.

When the disciples see Jesus, they cry out in fear;
they're terrified -- they're sure this is a ghost,

this is really the end.
Immediately, Jesus says to them,
 “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Now, you know about the phrase, “Do not be afraid”!
We hear it every time God or one of God’s angels appears in scripture.
Whether it’s God appearing to Abram, to Hagar, to Jacob, to Moses, to Joshua
Or angels coming to Abram & Sarai, to Elijah,
Or the angel Gabriel appearing to Daniel, to Mary, to Joseph
Or the angels appearing to the shepherds, and later, to Mary Madgdalene and the women
They all say the same thing: “Do not be afraid!”
 Because the normal response is to be afraid, of course!
 We’re always afraid when something life-changing is happening!
 It’s a dangerous time
 It’s a moment between new possibilities
 and leaving the old way of being behind
 It’s a moment of encounter with God,
 and God’s heart’s desire for us.

Now the disciples – and anyone listening to this story (including us) --
would remember what Moses told the Israelites:
 “Hear, O Israel! . . .
 Do not lose heart, or be afraid, or panic, or be in dread . . .
 for it is the Lord your God who goes with you (Dt 20:3-4)

They would remember what David told his son Solomon:
 “Be strong and of good courage, and act.
 Do not be afraid or dismayed;
 for the Lord God, my God, is with you.
 He will not fail you or forsake you” (1Chron 28:20)

They would remember what God told Isaiah:
 “‘You whom I took from the ends of the earth,
 and called from its farthest corners, saying to you,
 ‘You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off’;
do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Is 41:9-10)

When Jesus says, “Do not be afraid!”
the disciples– and anyone listening to this story (including us) --
Would remember that God is present,
with unconditional love,
and does not desert us.

Jesus also says, “Take heart!”
In the Bible, the heart is the center

of a person's emotions, intellect, and personality. . . .

So it's no surprise that the word for "heart" is used
850 times in the Hebrew Scriptures,
and 171 times in the New Testament

The goal of faithful living is to be "wholehearted" before God --
that's often translated as being "blameless" in Hebrew Scriptures"
and as being "perfect" in the New Testament

As we hear these stories of Jesus and the disciples,

We know that their hearts are their point of contact/connection with God,
and their goal is to be "wholehearted" --
one in heart before God

and wholeheartedly in love with God.

But this falling in love with God,
like falling in love with anyone.

takes time and testing and attention.

So Jesus tells them, "Take heart!"

In other words, "Get connected with God!"

The next thing we know, there's Peter, walking out on the water towards Jesus

Now Peter is so wonderful --

he's so impetuous,

he's falling so fully in love and alive in God.

He bumbles, and he puts his foot in his mouth so often --

he's so much like us -- especially when we're in love!

So he jumps right in!

Peter starts out with a wholehearted focus on Jesus,

and he's doing just fine,

and then he gets distracted by the strong wind

and he becomes afraid

and he begins to sink.

So he calls out, "Lord, save me!"

And Jesus takes his hand,

and says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Now the last time they were all in a storm at sea,

and the disciples cried out to Jesus,

Jesus said, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"

This time he's added something new: "Why did you doubt?"

To have "little faith" is not trusting enough

To "doubt" means to "waver,"

to be "caught between," or "to have to choose between two things"

This time, when Peter becomes distracted by the strong winds

he is pulled in two ways

between keeping his eyes on Jesus

and being caught up in fear of the storm.

Jesus is asking him,
“Why did you get distracted? How did you lose your focus?”

AND yet, in the middle of all of this,
this IS a “do not be afraid” moment.
It is a life-changing moment,
when even Peter’s fear and distraction will bring him back to God.
We know this because Peter finally calls out, “Save me!”
His fear of the storm, paradoxically,
becomes the very thing that impels him to trust Jesus
and, in turn, to trust God.
No longer the impetuous hero,
He refocuses.
When he calls out,
he’s no longer distracted;
he is once again “wholeheartedly”
focused on Jesus,
and Jesus gets him focused on God.
He is back on track.

Peter’s impetuous love ultimately keeps him on track
And, just like Peter found out,
we really do know that it’s that amazing, great love of God
that keeps us on track
even in fearful situations.

I was reminded of this at the Fabric Arts Festival this weekend
I came to a booth with quilts that were made with Amish colors
And I started talking with the man who made them.
We talked about how he started quilting when he couldn’t do wood-working
We talked about his quilts
and then he showed me a photo of a quilt he had at home
It wasn’t just any quilt.
It was one that had gently covered his wife when she died 4 years ago
And the same one that he’d tucked around his mother as she died.
He told me the story of the hard life his wife had led before they met
and how they’d just been married 5 years
when it became clear she was going to die.
All during that last week in the hospital
while she was in a coma
night after night, under that quilt,
he told her stories
and sang her songs
because he knew her life had been so difficult
that she hadn’t had time to process it --
she hadn’t had the time to put the pieces together

and see how it all made sense.

When I asked him how he knew just what to do
in a situation that seems quite strange
and even frightening to people,
he said, "It was love."
Love drove out his fear
and kept him wholeheartedly focused on his wife
in that hospital room.

And, then, he told me
on that last day
her face that had looked so worried and worn
for so many months
looked young again.

And he told me to tell you,
(because I did ask his permission to tell his story)
he told me to tell you
that when his wife died --
under that beautiful quilt that he'd made for her
and told stories to her under
and sang to her under --
the very next thing that happened when she died
was that he could feel her love flowing
all around him and through him.

And, as he put it, the worst day of his life
became also the best day of his life.

Life is amazing, he says,
and so many things can frighten us and get us off track
yet what's most important in all of it,
all the time,
is the love.

And that's what connects us with God!
No matter how frightening a situation may be
It's love that connects us with each other and God.
So, as Jesus tells us, "Do not be afraid!"

Notes:

The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII

Bilingual Reflections for Sunday

Fr. Frederico Fernandez, OFM, Templo de San Francisco, February 23, 2011

www.templodesanfrancisco.com

Strong's Concordance

Etymology Online

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TEXTS:

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Also

Matthew 8:18-28

Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him.