

Matthew 14:22-33 “Fear Not”

[Have people fill out fear surveys]

Fear is a strange thing and an even stranger motivator. In some instances it's good. Fear sets off our adrenal glands and floods our bodies with a hormone that increases our heart rate, our blood circulation and prepares our muscles to jump into action. Great for when you're about ready to get hit by a truck while crossing the road, but not so great when you're about ready to go onstage for your first piano recital. Or ... maybe that *is* a good thing. Maybe that extra rush of adrenaline is what prepares you to perform your best. It's *not* good when the fear paralyzes you, of course, but if your brain needs to be a little more alert in order for you to do the best you can do, then great!

We humans are funny though. Sometimes we voluntarily *subject* ourselves to fear ... to get that adrenaline rush. We pay money to go on roller coasters, parachute out of planes, and bungee jump off bridges. Or for the less physically adventurous, we pay money to watch scary movies. Some of us like the adrenaline rush. I have to confess that I'm one of these people. I've been known to stand in line for over an hour in order to sit in the front seat of whatever new roller coaster is at Busch Gardens or Six Flags.

When fear becomes troublesome is when it reaches out and grabs us unexpectedly when we're *not doing anything out of the ordinary*. Almost three and a half million people ... that's 1.5% of the US population ... suffers from chronic anxiety which often triggers debilitating panic attacks. It's a hard illness to treat, and it often takes years to find the right combination of medicine and therapy to manage. As someone who deals with occasional mild panic attacks, I can't imagine what it's like to face severe panic attacks on a regular basis.

Then there's another category which I guess we can just call “fearfulness.” That's when we find ourselves overwhelmed with the

troublesome or even worrisome issues of the world and are in a constant state of, “What happens next!?” I’ve heard this referred to as “phobic.” Or as Mary puts it, “Rehearsing for tragedy so you don’t have to face vulnerability.” This is when we’re constantly peeking around the proverbial corner because we’re not sure what’s going to face us on the other side. Sometimes this doesn’t even *look* like fear. It just looks like we’re prepared ... that we’re able to predict every possible outcome so that we can be equipped if things go south. Now I get that. I’ve taken steps to prepare for potential disaster, but not to the extent that folks who belong to militia groups or doomsday cults have. Again, we don’t often associate this kind of preparation with fear. In fact, some of these people look pretty bold and brave with the amount of food, water, supplies, and weapons that they’ve stock-piled. And they certainly don’t come across as shrinking violets. A lot of them carry themselves with what *appears* to be confidence. But when you get right down to the root of the reasons *why* they’ve gone to all the effort of making those kinds of preparations ... well ... that’s when you start recognizing fear. Fear of being attacked by a known or unknown enemy. Fear of natural disaster. Fear of our government being hijacked. Fear of people or groups of people we feel are potential threats. Now if you suggest to someone they’re doing these things out of fear, you better be prepared for a fight! But like I said ... why else would someone do this?

Here’s what I don’t want to do this morning. I don’t want to give the impression that I’m shaming anyone for feeling fearful at times. Sometimes it’s what keeps us alert enough to face life’s challenges. And here’s the other thing, fear doesn’t stand in polar opposite to bravery. In fact, many people who have acted bravely felt scared while they acted! It’s a natural response. Consider the disciples in our scripture lesson today. Jesus had sent them out on a boat on the Sea of Galilee after they had dealt with the crowds at the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus needed a break. A Sabbatical moment if you will. That’s what he and his disciples were trying to do anyway when their plans were interrupted by these 5,000 people who figured out where they were going and showed up ahead of them. Did Jesus turn the crowd away? No. He dealt with

the immediate need. But after all was said and done, Jesus needed a break *by himself*. So he sent the disciples on their way and went to a mountain to pray.

So here were the disciples in this boat on the Sea of Galilee which is famous for going from calm to choppy in no time flat. The boat was battered by the waves and the wind pushed them away from the shore. The disciples were probably feeling pretty fearful when they were being battered by the waves. Then when they saw Jesus walking on the water toward the boat the next morning, they were even more afraid. They thought he was a ghost! Jesus tried to calm their fears. “Whoa, calm down guys, it’s just me. Don’t be afraid.” And what happens next? Peter steps forward. Literally. Out into the water. So now the question becomes, “Is this a case where Peter demonstrates faith by his willingness to get out of the boat?” Of course not! How many times in the gospels does Peter *ever* get to be the disciple who’s the *good* example, right? Sure, it happens from time to time, but most of the time Peter gets to demonstrate what *not* to say and do. Funny that the one who is often the example of how to screw things up is the “lead disciple” right? More on that later. Here’s what makes Peter so fun to read about: This is the disciple who was the first to identify Jesus as the Messiah! But he’s also the one that said something so stupid in the next breath that it caused Jesus to tell him, “Get behind me, satan!” So one minute Peter can be the best example of faith and the next minute he’s the goat.

So let’s look at this little interchange: Right after Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid, it’s me” Peter says, “Lord, *if it is you*, command me to come to you on the water.” What? “*If it is you*”? Jesus just said, “Don’t be afraid, *it’s me!*” Here’s an interesting correlation. Who else in the gospels addresses Jesus by saying “*If you are the son of God ...*”? When Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness, it was Satan who kept saying, “*If you are the son of God, do this. If you are the son of God, do that.*” So what’s Peter doing right here?! “Well Lord, *if it is you*, prove it by commanding me to come to you on the water.” I can just picture

Jesus giving a little, “here-we-go-again shrug” saying, “Okay ... come on then.” Then the next thing you know, Peter’s comes out on the water just in time to be “the example” again. Peter gets overwhelmed by fear, starts to sink, Jesus rescues him *yet again* and says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” See, I think that a lot of people interpret this to mean, “Why did you doubt yourself or your ability to walk on water?” Or, “Why did you doubt my ability to help you navigate these waves” or something like that. What if Jesus was giving him a hard time about the doubt that caused Peter to jump ship in the first place? What if it’s the *doubt* that caused Peter to say, “*If it is you*” in the first place? The doubt that made him unwilling to wait in the boat with everyone else until Jesus actually got to the boat?

Think about it! No doubt Jesus was on his way across the water to get in the boat. And when he finally *does* get in the boat, the storm subsides. So maybe when the storms of life hit, true faith isn’t this daredevil bravado that says “I can be special and take on the waves by myself without need of the boat!” (Peter. We’re looking at you man.) Maybe *true* faith is the resilience to *stay in the boat that Jesus told us to get into in the first place!* Maybe true faith is *trusting the boat*, flimsy though it may feel with the storm raging on around us. Maybe true faith is trusting even if Jesus seems a long way off when we think we need him. Maybe real faith is the capacity to keep trusting that, even though we’re in the boat with a bunch of flawed people who are no better at believing than we are, we are better off *in* the boat than *out* of it and that Jesus will come when the time is right. And maybe that right time is when we’ve experienced being in the storm together. By then, maybe we’ll realize that when Jesus finally arrives, he won’t want us to jump out of the boat because he will *get into the boat with us* and bring us safely to shore! So let’s join our voices together with these disciples who, in many ways, are in the same boat we are, and say, “Truly Jesus is the Son of God.”