

Fear Itself

Mark 6:30-56

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
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Fear is a theme that runs through the Gospel of Mark. And in this story the disciples' fear get in the way of their understanding who Jesus is and what he's doing.

We've skipped over a few passages since last week's sermon, in those stories Jesus calmed the storm on the sea, cast demons into pigs, healed a woman of a twelve-year hemorrhage, and raised from apparent death a young girl. All of this witnessed by the disciples.

Jesus also sent them out on their own mission. They went two-by-two, ordered to spread his message. They were also given power to heal and cast out demons. However, no stories are shared about their time away from Jesus and whether or not they were successful.

You think after all of Jesus' teaching and all of his actions and even having sent them out on their internship, the disciples would be farther along in understanding who he is and what he's doing. But they aren't.

First is this famous story of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus and his disciples went into the wilderness to get away from the crowds, but now the crowds have followed them even here, so Jesus teaches them. The disciples are anxious—they didn't plan to feed all of these people. But they are forgetting what Jesus has already taught them.

When he sent them out on their own mission, he told them not to take any money or any bread and to rely upon the hospitality and generosity of the people they were ministering too. Jesus is creating a new social order rooted in a new family, a table fellowship of radical hospitality. The instructions for the mission are meant to teach the disciples to let go of their anxiety and to trust in the kindness of strangers and the grace of God.

Apparently, they've failed. Because now they are anxious. They also seem to have some money and five loaves of bread. You might miss the irony of them possessing two things Jesus earlier had specifically told them not to have.

But Jesus shows that you can trust in God's provision and the crowd's hospitality and generosity, as more than enough food is produced to feed the masses. The message—quit worrying.

And then we get on a boat again. Jesus has already calmed a storm. In that story Jesus questioned the disciples, "Why are you afraid?" Yet, here they are, once again in the boat in a storm, facing the forces of chaos and disorder, and they are, once again, afraid. Afraid because they still fail to understand. Afraid because their hearts are hard. Even these closest to Jesus are incapable of understanding what he is doing.

Which prompts us to ask, what keeps us from understanding Jesus? What are we afraid of?

Even as a kid, I was fascinated by history and people's stories. At family gatherings I

would ask my relatives about their experiences. My great-aunt Lavenia enjoyed telling stories. She talked about how when the Depression came her parents had loaded up the six kids and all their belongings on the Model T. “It was like *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Beverly Hillbillies*,” she said, laughing. They traveled the country looking for work, though they never made it to California. She told how once, when they were in Colorado, the car couldn’t make it up the slopes loaded down with so many people and things, so they all had to get out and walk as the car sputtered its way to the top.

Your family probably has their own Depression stories.

By 1933 one-fourth of the American workforce was unemployed. Industrial production had dropped by fifty percent. The banking system was on the verge of complete collapse, and at least two million people were homeless. According to Wikipedia, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the newly elected president “saw the Depression as partly a matter of confidence – people had stopped spending, investing, and employing labor because they were afraid to do so. . . . He therefore set out to restore confidence through a series of dramatic gestures.”

Roosevelt was convinced that the most serious problem facing the country wasn’t the economic crisis itself, but the fear that had resulted from it. So, in his famous first inaugural address, he rose to speak to the people with “candor” and “decision.” He realized that this was a moment of opportunity from which the country could learn and be transformed. Roosevelt declared,

This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

Roosevelt went on to thank God that the difficulties the country faced concerned material things, but that together the people could face the situation. Yes, it was a dark time, but “Compared with the perils which our forefathers conquered because they believed and were not afraid, we have still much to be thankful for.” [By that way, that quote is an allusion to Mark chapter 5 where Jesus says, “Do not fear, only believe.”] Roosevelt claimed that the country’s problems had originated in the unscrupulous practices of its economic leaders; they had been a “generation of self-seekers.” These leaders “have no vision, and when there is no vision the people perish.”

Roosevelt challenged the people. “Restoration calls, however, not for changes in ethics alone. This Nation asks for action, and action now.” The situation called for “courage and devotion.” Roosevelt intended to act boldly and called for the people’s support.

Facing a very complex economic and political crisis, President Roosevelt focused on one thing – unhealthy fear. Fear that was self-seeking. Fear that was paralyzing.

Now, the Great Depression was one of the more frightening times in our history, so it is only healthy that one would be scared during such a crisis. Roosevelt’s analysis was that the people had responded in unhealthy ways to their fear. What they must do is transform their fear into healthy action. They must pull together, take bold steps, and in the process they

would be able to overcome this terrible situation.

Herman Waetjen translates Jesus' statement to the disciples in the midst of the storm on the sea as "Keep on being courageous! I am. Stop being afraid!" What Jesus has been trying to teach them and show them is that God is creating a New Human Being which he, Jesus, is the first of but which is available to all of them as followers. Waetjen writes, "To be divine offspring means nothing less than full participation in the limitless possibilities of God." That's the meaning of walking on water and stilling storms, of casting out demons and raising the dead—this new way of God is an opportunity for us to share in God's power and glory to the benefit of all humanity. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ—all humanity is called to share in the power and glory of the children of God.

The disciples' fear is holding them back from truly understanding this good news, from realizing their full potential as God's agents. Do we have the same problem?

I was 29 when I began my journey out as a gay man. Part of what kept me in the closet for so long was fear. Fear that I'd lose my career as a minister. Fear that I'd lose my family. Fear that I'd never have children of my own.

Finally, in the autumn of 2003, after much prayer and struggle, I had my epiphany, while watching the HBO film version of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. When, at the close of the film, Prior Walter looks at the camera and blesses the audience with "More Life" and extends the call with the words "The Great Work Begins," I finally found the resolve, the integrity, and the courage to pursue the truth.

This week I was looking back over a sermon I preached on fear in the Gospel of Mark back in 2006, less than a year into my pastorate at the Cathedral of Hope in Oklahoma City. Near the close of the sermon I said, "The way to authentic human existence, the way to create God's reign, is to grab hold of the power of Jesus." I then spoke of how in the months before I had experienced moments of overwhelming joy. Some of those were in worship, some were as I experienced life finally as a member of the gay community.

In that sermon, I then closed:

I'm overwhelmed by a sense of elation, excitement, confidence, hope, and freedom. It is a joy born of transformation. A transformation that was not painless, but was healing. An opportunity to release fear and experience the power of God.

Reading that more than a decade later, I remembered how the fear I once had melted away once I spoke the truth about myself and began to live freely as God intended me to live. To give up our fear and claim our power and glory is to experience moments of overwhelming joy.

I then realized something else about that sermon. I met Michael Cich that week. So, it was the last sermon I ever preached before I met my future husband. With hindsight, I see that I was ready. I had undergone a transformation, I was optimistic and joyful, and my eyes were open to new possibilities. So, a few days later, when he walked into the restaurant where I was eating with friends, and I saw him come through the door looking so handsome and confident, I was ready.

My story is one of success and blessing. I kept my calling and career. I kept my family. And I found love which ultimately led to our blessed child.

We have nothing to fear but fear itself. Instead, let us overcome our fear and claim our birthright as the children of God—our share of divine power and glory. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ.