

King of Glory Lutheran Church, Loveland, CO

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Matthew 14: 22-33 What are you Afraid of?

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When our fears overcome us, God grabs us and says, "Take heart." God doesn't abandon us in times of trial or when we make mistakes.

What are you afraid of? What scares you?

Charlottesville, Virginia and words of hate. Venezuela; a country in crisis. The nuclear rhetoric from North Korea and the United States. Even if it's not cities or countries, perhaps fear comes regularly at work, or the relationship that awaits you at home.

As they sat around the conference table, she couldn't muster the courage to offer her idea to the group. Her boss appeared particularly intimidating today in his dark suit coat. "What if they think it's stupid?"

The middle school gymnasium was darkened. It was a slow dance. The boy began to make his way across the room to where she was standing. "Oh, she looks so pretty tonight," he thought. Just then, their eyes met. She turned abruptly and quickly left the gym.

Maybe just walking into a church has made you scared. He sat alone at the back of the sanctuary in silence, deep in thought. "God, if you are out there...I mean, I don't know if you listen to people like me...I haven't walked the straight line all my life, well really not at all...but if you're God you probably know that already."

What are you afraid of? We all may be familiar with the famous line, "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." Well, that's perhaps true. But it's not so helpful when we're ready to hit the panic alarm.

Just like other emotions, fear runs along a spectrum. Just a twinge of anxiety here, real apprehension here, getting scared, real fear here, panic, horror, encompassed by terror here. When you think you're scared, it might be helpful to ask, "How scared am I?"

Psychology Today defines fear as "a vital response to physical and emotional danger—if we didn't feel it, we couldn't protect ourselves from legitimate threats." (www.psychologytoday.com/basics/fear) It helps us protect ourselves and protect

the ones we love. We get out of uneasy situations; we stop the grandkids from touching the hot stove. It is neither abnormal nor a sign of weakness.

Fear can compel us on towards courage and strength. Conquering fear is liberating; like opening window shades on a dark room. It can also be incredibly restrictive and hold us captive. It can steal our confidence, capitalizing on our insecurities. Fear can even make us lie to ourselves. When the dread is so strong being afraid keeps us from moving forward or taking action that is needed. But if all we've ever known is one way, it can be scary to march into the unknown.

Fear can come in an instant – the car that comes careening around the corner- or we can see it coming slowly like dark clouds gathering in the sky. Fear that goes unexpressed can lead to depression, because when we bring fear out into the light, it diminishes, especially when we share it with others.

“Daddy, I don't want to go to sleep. There are monsters under my bed.”
“Oh sweetie, let's turn the light on and together we'll look under there. See? No monsters. Do you think you can go to sleep now?” “Yes, I think so Daddy.”

Whether we are young or old, all of us have experienced fear and its effects on our lives.

Peter has so often gotten a bad rap from this familiar text. Stupid Peter. Weak Peter. Peter doesn't have enough faith. Don't be like Peter – he failed because he became afraid. He had every reason to be afraid, he was walking on 6 foot waves!

Some twenty of us watched the movie “The Shack” recently. The main character, Mack Phillips, follows Jesus directive to row the boat out into the middle of the lake. The scene mirrors the Biblical story with Peter and in the movie. Mack's boat begins to fill with dark, murky water. His mind floods with all the bad experiences in his life recently and he gets alarmed.

Can you imagine all the water in the disciples' boat? Here's what bothers me about this text. St. Matthew writes, “When evening came, Jesus was there alone (up on the mountain praying), but the boat *battered* by the waves was already far away.” The disciples are out there all night by themselves; they too had reason to be frightened. Where was Jesus?

Why didn't Jesus come rescue the guys during the night? He waited until the early morning to come walking around. Those men had been rowing all night, worn out

by swell after swell of water. They're wondering if this storm would ever end, and then God decides to act. Been there?

"God are you going to show up? My son needs a new kidney and he's running out of time!" "Jesus where are you? My marriage is dissolving and you don't seem to care. I'm exhausted!" "I've tried and tried to change, but I don't think I can."

There are times in life when God appears to be absent to us. It might feel like God is delaying or not doing God's part. We will never be able to comprehend God's ways. For all we know, Jesus was on that mountain already controlling the storm just enough so the boat wouldn't be swamped. He might have been physically absent, but faithfully present knowing their every stroke of oar.

Here's the Good News. Here is God's promise, the Gospel from this text. What happens when Peter realizes he is walking on water and then notices the strength of the storm? He begins to sink. And when Peter begins to sink from his fright, immediately Jesus reaches out and grabs him.

"I've got you Peter. Come on." God restores Peter to his right mind. So often in our lives of faith, it is fear that keeps us from living an abundant life with God. We drill it into our heads – or we've been told, or taught in sermons – that making mistakes, sinning, an inability to change, and our wobbly sea legs discipleship – all those things, will drive God away from us.

Some of us walk through these doors, week after week wondering if we'll ever measure up. How could God forgive me for... How can God forget... How could I have ever done that and still believe God might love me. Our fear of failure is keeping us out of relationship with God who reaches into the water in our moment of need and grabs us.

That fear is farthest from the truth! Jesus grabs Peter. I see his hand on Peter's forearm – "Here you go, my friend. Get back in the boat."

We are not defined by our fears, our sins, mistakes, even our very looking around to notice there are large waves. No. We are defined by the One who saves us. By the One who reaches into the water as if it were thin air and says, 'Come on, Peter. Come on, Beth. Come on, Ron. Come on Jane. Let's get back in the boat where it's safe.'

Hear that again. We are defined by the One who saves us. We are not defined by our fears or mistakes. Jesus saves us. We don't save ourselves. As Martin Luther said, "For God does not want to save us by our own but by an extraneous righteousness, one that does not originate in ourselves but comes to us from beyond ourselves, which does not arise on earth but comes from heaven."
(<http://www.azquotes.com/quote/558140>)

Our fear can be exchanged for God's power working in, through and around us. Thanks be to God! That alone can bring us abundant life. Fear might still be present, yet we can walk in God's power, not our own.

Secondly, not only does Jesus get Peter back in the boat, he restores Peter to his place in the boat. Not a flunky. Still a disciple. God believes we are more than our past history. God has a larger vision of who we can be. God can help us survive and transcends our fear.

God says to us in Christ, "Your story isn't over. I created you and I know there is more to you than you know or recognize yet. Your past need not determine your future. And your fears and failings certainly don't prohibit you from my love, acceptance and hope. Here, give me your hand." (Idea from David Lose, In the Meantime. <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-10-a-something-more/>)

What are we afraid of? May it not be ourselves. Because unless I'm reading the story wrong, it was Jesus who pulled Peter out, not Peter who pulled Peter out.
Amen.