9-20-20 Sermon “Facing Our Fears”

Facing our fears is a huge conversation isn’t it? I mean, we all have fears of some kind or another, whether we think of them that way or not. The fear of public speaking is often at the top of the list when most people are surveyed about what they’re afraid of. Fear of spiders or snakes is usually up there as well, as is fear of flying. I was never really afraid of flying, although I’ll admit it raises my anxiety level sometimes. The very first time I flew was in May of 1985. I was 25 years old and had just come to Columbus with Kmart from my previous assignment in southwestern Indiana. I had only been at my new store for a couple of weeks and still staying in a motel while I searched for an apartment. Since my old home was a six hour drive, Kmart agreed to fly me down and back over Memorial Day weekend to help my wife pack up our apartment.

I flew from Columbus to Indianapolis on a full-sized plane, but the flight from Indy to Evansville was aboard what’s called a regional transport, or in some places, a “puddle-jumper.” The plane wasn’t as big as this chancel area, had a single row of seats down each side of the cabin and held 20 people at most. And this being pre-9/11, the only thing separating the cabin from the cockpit was a curtain, which was wide open. From the cabin you could literally look out the front window of the plane. Which was great, until on that leg of the trip a huge thunderstorm broke out and the plane was tossed and turned unlike anything I had ever experienced apart from a ride at the county fair. Thunder and lighting flashed and roared, the plane lifted and dropped, twisted and turned for most of the 90 minute flight. As we approached the airport in Evansville, I could catch a glimpse out the front window of the runway lights in the distance, and I could see from how they appeared and disappeared, that our approach was being buffeted from all sides. As the plane got closer and closer to the ground I was pretty scared - there was no way, I thought, in this wind and with this plane moving as though it were in the hands of 4 year old, that any of us would survive. But, at the very last second, when it seemed as though we had to be about to corkscrew into the Hoosier soil, the plane suddenly leveled out and immediately touched down on the runway. As we slowed upon landing, the more experienced flyers in the cabin applauded the crew for their work. I sat there, white knuckled, wondering if I’d be able to get onto a plane for my return trip in three days.

Fast forward to 2017. Over the years, believe it or not, I actually developed a love for flying, in spite of that initial experience, even talking occasionally about possibly wanting to get my pilot’s license and learn to fly for myself. So hearing that, the previous Christmas had Lynn bought me an introductory flying lesson at Don Scott field at OSU. I was both excited and, admittedly, more than a little anxious about the idea - I wasn’t 25 any more. But, when the weather warmed up I scheduled the lesson, only to have it rescheduled twice by the flight instructor because the winds were too strong on those days. When the day finally arrived, I drove nervously to the airport, realizing that I talked a good game about wanting to fly, but when the rubber met the runway, as it were, I was not nearly so confident. I had one hour of pre-flight instruction before the instructor and I went to the Light Sport plane in which I would receive the lesson.

**>>>INSERT PHOTO OF PLANE HERE**

My first car was bigger than this plane. It looked like one of those Smart Cars with a wing on top. We got in and I noticed two sets of controls, one on each side. Not a steering wheel of sorts, but more of a joystick like on a video game. The other thing I noticed was there was no storage space behind the seats for anything like, oh, I don’t know, parachutes? The instructor informed me that we didn’t need personal chutes because the plane itself had a parachute. In case of an emergency we would just cut the engine and then pull on a centrally located lever that would release a whole-plane chute that would lower us safely to the ground. Oh Geez!

**>>>INSERT INSTRUMENT PANEL PIC**

As he went over the instrument panel with me I noticed that it obstructed the view, that while I could see above, I couldn’t see straight ahead towards the horizon. However, the plane afforded a full view out the windows in the doors beside us. The instructor told me that he would taxi us to the runway and take us through take off and that at that point he would instruct me over the radio, “your airplane,” and from that moment I would have control of the plane. Well, we taxied to the runway, received clearance take off and down the runway we started. I was looking out the side windows, watching the buildings go past as our speed increased when I felt the plane lift from the ground. “Your airplane!” I heard in my earphones. “Are you nuts?” I thought to myself - we’re not 10 feet off the ground yet! But it was my airplane so I continued to pull back on that joystick and we maintained our climb, although not as smoothly as any of us would have liked.

**>>>INSERT JAY THE PILOT PHOTO**

It took about 20 minutes to get a feel for how to smoothly control the plane using both landmarks and instruments. We flew from Columbus up to the airport in Marysville, where the instructor had me descend for a “simulated landing,” only to pull back up and return the plane to a steady flying altitude. We turned and repeated that maneuver at the Delaware airport before again turning to make the return leg to Don Scott field. As we approached the I-270 Outerbelt on the north side the instructor told me to aim the plane in the direction of the twin water towers that we could see miles ahead and that once we passed those we would be able to see the airport off to the right, at which point we would begin our descent to land. All was going well - I was feeling reasonably confident and enjoying myself. We flew over the towers at about 3,000 feet and I began to bank to the right and descend for the landing. I lined us up on the runway and, receiving guidance on rate of descent, moved us closer to the airport. With the runway just ahead of us and the plane descending from an altitude of 500’ to 400’, 300’ 200’ I kept expecting to hear the words “My airplane” over the headphones, but they didn’t come. 150’, 100’, 50’…crickets. When we got to an altitude at which, looking out the side window, I was pretty sure I could just get out and walk the rest of the way, those magic words, “my airplane,” crackled over the headphones and I felt control of the plane switch from my side to his. We touched down on the runway, I breathed a sigh of relief, only to immediately hear again in my ears, “your airplane,” after which I was instructed on how and where to taxi back to the hanger. A few minutes later, after telling me how well I did and how I was “a natural” - assumedly to try to get me to buy a package of lessons - I was back in the much larger cockpit of my car, wheels firmly on the ground, returning home.

Fear can manifest itself in different ways, can’t it? Sometimes it keep us in a state of inaction, causing people to freeze up, physically, mentally, even spiritually. Other times fear causes a fight or flight response - just go! Sometimes fear is a good thing, such as when it puts us on alert. Other times, though, fear can be debilitating, even destructive to us. Sometimes our fears are realistic, such as when you’re on an airplane in the midst of a really bad storm. Other times our fears are more our imagination running away with us than any real likelihood. But we all have fears, either major or minor, with which we have to deal, whether it’s an external fear or something more personal and intimate: the fear of loneliness, the fear of not having enough money, time, or food, even the fear of death.

Sometimes it’s in the most challenging times of our lives that we most clearly feel or experience God’s presence. That’s not to suggest that those are the only times that God shows up. I think it’s more likely that there’s just something about significant challenges and trials that clarify our priorities and block out the distractions of everyday life so that our eyes are open to see God’s constant presence more clearly.

In exploring our passage from Matthew 14 today, I want us to also consider a similar passage from Matthew 8, in which Jesus is in a boat with the disciples, asleep, while a storm rages all around them. The disciples, you’ll remember, frightened and sure they’re going to die, wake Jesus and ask, “do you not care that we are about to drown?” But then, Jesus, questioning their lack of faith, speaks to the raging storm, and the winds and the seas grow quiet. And the disciples ask, for themselves and perhaps for us as well, “Who is this man that the wind and the seas obey him?”

In today’s passage from chapter 14, we find the disciples once again in a boat going across the sea, only this time Jesus is not with them. This event takes place immediately after the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus has sent them away by themselves while he dismissed the crowds and then went up a mountain to pray. Clearly, Jesus is an introvert who needed his alone time after being in a crowd! Anyway, from his mountain side perch Jesus can see the disciples struggling against the waves in their boat, so he walks across the water, as one does, towards their location. Interestingly, in borrowing this story from Mark’s Gospel, Matthew leaves out Mark’s line that Jesus “intended to pass them by,” but that’s another sermon for another day. As Jesus approaches the boatload of disciples, they think it’s a ghost and cry out in fear. And it’s here that Jesus responds, “Be encouraged,” some translations say, “Take heart,” and then “It’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

Three small sentences. “Be encouraged. It’s me. Don’t be afraid.” If you’ve had opportunity to be around our own Bishop Gregory Palmer at all then you’ve heard his charge to us always to “Be encouraged.” The second sentence, “It’s me,” is more accurately translated from the Greek as “I am,” the divine declaration of identity and presence given directly by God to Moses at the burning bush. “Be encouraged, I am…” This use of the divine name would not have been lost or overlooked by the disciples, even in the midst of their fear. And then “do not be afraid” - one of the most commonly repeated phrases found in scripture. This self-revelation identifies the source of Jesus’ power and strength - “be encouraged, I am, be not afraid.” As Carla Works, Wesley Theological Seminary Professor of New Testament writes,

“Jesus’ self-revelation moves beyond his words. His actions are also revealing. According to Job 9:8, God alone stretched out the heavens and tramped the waves of the Sea. In Psalm 89:9, the psalmist exalts the Lord, “You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.” In the midst of the sea’s churning, Jesus does what only God can do. *This is a theophany…”[[1]](#footnote-2)* a visible manifestation to humankind of God.

And it’s here that Peter, feeling emboldened, says to Jesus, “Lord, if it’s you, order me to come to you on the water.” Let’s unpack that line. Where have we heard someone pose the question, “if it’s you,” to Jesus before? As Mark Hoffman from United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, PA points out, in asking “if it is you,” Peter “is joining the company of Satan (Mt 4:3, 6), the high priest (Mt 26:63), and [Jesus’] mockers at the cross (Mt 27:40) who put the same challenge to Jesus. In each case, just like Peter, they want Jesus to do something in order to verify his identity. This is not a good thing…”[[2]](#footnote-3)

So, Peter says “if it is you, order me to come to you on the water.” And as he first steps out of the boat Peter is confident - “I’ve got this” he must be thinking to himself. But soon the height of the waves and the depth of the sea register with him, and he sinks like the rock that will later become his nickname. And it’s here in Peter’s distress, that Jesus reaches out and grabs him. And it’s in this moment that the disciples, having heard Jesus remark on Peter’s lack of faith, confess “Truly, you are the Son of God,” answering the question they had left hanging at the end of the passage from chapter 8.

And this is interesting if you think about it. The disciples had just witnessed Jesus feeding 5,000 people, as David Lose referred to it, “revealing both divine power and compassion. And yet it’s here, at this moment of **extremity**, when the disciples perceive most clearly who Jesus is.”[[3]](#footnote-4) And then Lose points out that in this way we, too, are like the disciples. We often overlook or perhaps take for granted God’s presence when things are peaceful and going well in our lives, but as soon as things go south we call out for God to help us. And I guess that’s to be expected - God desires that we flourish. “But,” as Lose writes, “ all too often we note our modest success and assume we no longer need God, or at least forget how much a part of our lives God is and desires to be. Or perhaps we confuse safety and stability with abundant life. Either way, we may forget how much we depend on God. Until tragedy strikes in the form of illness and job loss or the end of a relationship [or a pandemic] or some grave mistake we’ve made, and suddenly our ongoing need for God becomes abundantly clear.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

This story though, doesn’t just reveal **our** nature, it reveals the nature of God. First, it reminds us of our need for God, and that no matter the situation, God responds. Just as Jesus reassures the disciples of who he is and that they need not fear, and then reaches out to grab hold of Peter as he is falling, so also God responds to us and our needs with love, power, compassion, and support. And second, and maybe more importantly, God not only responds to our needs, but “actually desires that we seek to live lives of abundance and courage. Notice that Jesus actually commanded the disciples to cross the sea ahead of him, trusting them to navigate both sea and storm.”[[5]](#footnote-6) And while some may think Peter’s request to join Jesus on the waves as foolishness or arrogance on his part, I have to believe that Jesus felt some degree of delight in the faith that led Peter to make the request in the first place.

And I think this is still God’s desire for us - that we trust in God, that we trust in God’s presence with us in all times and all places, not just those times when fear overtakes us. I believe God wants for us to step out in faith, out of our comfort zones, and “live with courage and hope, taking chances, risking ourselves in relationship, seeking the welfare of the [people] and the community around us,” especially those who don’t have a faith or a faith community to trust in during difficult times like these, “all the while remembering that even when we overlook God’s presence yet God is always there, sometimes to encourage us to overcome our fears, sometimes sending us out ahead, and sometimes reaching out to grab hold of us in forgiveness, mercy, comfort, and grace.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

God desires for us to create new places, safe places, for new people, **here**, in a place that is safe in the love of God, and **now**, in a time that elicits so much fear in so many people for so many reasons. God is with us, even now, and God encourages us to cross the rough waters that our world finds itself in and to step out of the boat in faith that God is there and will grab onto us if we find ourselves in need. God is with us in our need, and God calls us to live whole-hearted lives, not in fear, but in courage and hope. So may you feel the presence of the God within whom we live, and breathe, and have our being, and may that presence remind and compel you to “be not afraid.” Amen.

1. Works, Carla, [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org)*,* August 10, 2014, Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33, Accessed September 10, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Hoffman, Mark G. Vitalis, [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org), August 7, 2011, Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33, Accessed September 10, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Lose, David, [DavidLose.net](http://DavidLose.net), In The Meantime: Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33, Accessed September 10, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-7)