

FAITH & FEAR

08.09.26 -- Matthew 14: 22-33

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Several years ago, on the television drama “The West Wing,” two characters were talking about things that scare them—or, in their words, “creep them out.”

“Bridges!” said Josh, the young, idealistic speechwriter and adviser to the president. “Those great big ones. Every time I drive over one, I think about it falling and all of us plummeting to our deaths, and how horrible that would be. Don’t you ever think of that when you cross a bridge?”

Leo, the grizzled, old chief of staff, wrinkles his brow in thought. “Well, not until now!”

Fear can be like a virus that infects, spreads, and re-infects. It can cause blindness, paralysis, even death. It is contagious. It moves from person to person, group to group. And sometimes it brings about reactions that are worse than the disease itself.

The gospel calls Christians to respond to our fears in a different and more authentic way, but not necessarily an easier one.

A WORLD OF FEAR AND MADNESS?

Sixteen-year-old Julie Bremnes huddled beneath a rock with three of her friends and listened to the gunfire and the screams. As she hid, she sent a frantic text message to her mother: “We are in fear for our lives.”

How her mother Marianne’s hands must have trembled as she texted back, “I understand. Stay hidden.”

We can only imagine the terror that this child and her friends felt as they hid and waited for help to come, and the profound and terrible fear which must have gripped her mother as she sat helplessly in her home, counting the ninety long minutes until her daughter was rescued.

In the end, we learned that the perpetrator of this horror was not a Muslim extremist, as many of us assumed it must be, but Anders Breivik, a native Norwegian, a right-wing extremist whose own fear of Islam was so great that it had somehow twisted his mind to the point where he thought that killing Norwegian teenagers at a summer camp, and absolute strangers in downtown Oslo, was going to make him less afraid.

And now we are left with our fears of extremists of every stripe. What will our response be?

Here in the United States, we could empathize with our Norwegian brothers and sisters. Even now, twenty-five years after that horrible September 11, the wounds are still tender, and our anxieties are still real. We know the grief and the fear they are feeling.

We applaud their Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, when he says that this horrible act will not keep Norway from being a kind, tolerant, and gentle country. But we also realize that neither can it be business as usual. Security will tighten. Barriers will go up. Trust will be eroded.

That's what fear does.

And it is not just international terrorism that we fear. Senseless crime and violence invade our sense of security. In Columbus, Ohio, a young man is shot and killed over a baseball cap. In New York City, a child walking home from school is abducted and murdered by a person from whom he asked directions. In Minnesota, a politician and her husband are gunned down by a home invader who disagreed with her liberal politics; and in Seattle, innocent bystanders, including a three-year-old child, are shot at a food festival by three teenagers who are shooting at each other.

What's the solution?

Shall we give up? Shall we arm ourselves and turn the whole world into Tombstone, Arizona, circa 1881—every parking lot the O.K. Corral? Shall we look upon every stranger as a potential enemy and surrender to the notion that we are all nothing but potential victims waiting to be brutalized? Shall we teach our children to fear and hate because that is the only sane, rational, and prudent alternative in a world gone mad?

As Christians, we turn for answers to the scriptures.

WALKING ON THE WATER

Immediately after the miracle of loaves and fishes—the feeding of the 5,000, which we visited last Sunday—Jesus sends his disciples across the Sea of Galilee. Needing some personal, private time, he arranges to meet them on the other side. As they are crossing the lake, however, a storm comes up, making their journey both difficult and frightening.

And, as if the blowing wind and rain aren't scary enough when you are stuck in a boat in the middle of a huge lake, they look up and see an apparition that looks like nothing so much as a ghost coming toward them, walking on the water.

These men are not fools. Their response to all of this is what we might expect: fear. No, not just fear—terror. The prospect of drowning and/or being confronted with a ghost that walks on water will do that to you.

Fear in this case is the sane, rational and prudent response.

Jesus tries to allay their fears by identifying himself. "Don't be afraid. It's me, Jesus."

Peter, however, knows that that is exactly what a ghost would say—especially if he is trying to trick them. So, he tests the situation to see if his fear is appropriate.

"Oh, yeah? Well, if it's really you, command me to come to you and walk on the water, too."

Much to everyone's surprise, the response comes back over the sound of the howling wind and the creaking boat and the splashing waves. One word: "Come."

Peter decides to lay his life on the line to complete the test. He steps out of the boat and, lo and behold, he walks on the water. That is, he walks on the water until he realizes just how big this storm is. He takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to look around him, and in that moment, he begins to sink, calling out to Jesus as he goes down: "Lord, help me!"

Jesus reaches out to him, saves him, helps him back into the boat, and then admonishes—or maybe kids—him: "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

GETTING OUT OF THE BOAT

Ignore the storm. Get out of the boat and walk on the waves.

That's just crazy! Okay, maybe not crazy, but it sure is counterintuitive. It isn't the sane, rational, prudent thing to do. Is it?

And yet, that is exactly what Jesus bids us do in this story. That's how faith works. As the bluegrass gospel song says:

You gotta get out of the boat
If you wanna walk on the water.
You gotta get out of the boat
If you wanna tread where Jesus trod.
You gotta put your fears behind you
And stand up just like Peter
You gotta keep your eye on the Savior
And put your faith in God.

When I was about seven years old, my family bought and moved into the sixth house in what would become a large housing development just off Route 40 on the west side of Indianapolis. The streets had all been poured and named, and the lots had been marked off. Houses were going up here and there, and young families were moving in as fast as the houses were finished. It was a pretty cool place for a bunch of kids to live and play.

In the undeveloped area about 100 yards behind our house, there was an old, abandoned car just sitting there, waiting to be hauled away. It was rusted out, and the tires were all flat. The engine was gone, as was the lid to the trunk. The doors were missing, and the seats were moldy and torn, but the steering wheel was still in place.

It didn't take long for it to become a sort of clubhouse for the neighborhood kids. We would meet there and act out the movies we had seen, pretending that we were in an army tank fighting Nazis or driving in the Indianapolis 500. It would be our fort from which we shot at attacking Apache Indians or marauding Arab warriors.

Then, one day, when about six of us were sitting in the car, taking a break from the violence and mayhem, we heard a low humming sound. It got gradually louder, and it felt like the whole car was buzzing. Then, suddenly, some of the kids started screaming, and then everyone was screaming and crying, and we all dove out of the car and started running toward home.

Our mothers heard us coming and came out into the yards as we reached them and they started swatting and slapping around the kids with their hands and dish towels.

Yellow jackets. Or hornets. We never did find out exactly which it was, but we disturbed their nest, and they attacked us en masse, stinging all of us repeatedly as we ran.

All of us, that is, except me. I was the only one of the six kids who did not get stung. My little brother, Scot, was stung five times—yes, I still remember the number—because he fell as he was running. All the other kids got stung several times, but somehow, I was spared.

My mother used to recall that it probably would have been better if I had been stung at least once, because I was hysterical—screaming and crying inconsolably, not because of the pain, but because of my fear of the unknown.

Some horrible, invisible, droning, buzzing force was attacking and hurting my brother and my friends and was trying to attack me—and maybe kill me. I didn't know what it was or how to escape it, except to run toward home as fast as I could.

After a while, things calmed down. Stings were salved with ice and onion and ointment, and my mother managed to calm me down with a cold, wet towel on my head. We all survived pretty much intact, except for one wound that never went away: To this day, I am afraid of stinging insects. Bees, hornets, wasps—they all scare me to death.

It's called apiphobia or melissophobia—an unreasonable fear of stinging insects—and I know it's not rational. I've been stung scores of times by all kinds of insects since that time sixty years ago. And, yeah, it hurts, but it didn't kill me, and I continued through the day. But none of that matters when there's a wasp flying around in the room or a bee in my car. I still break out in a cold sweat.

But in the grand scheme of things, my apiphobia—the fear of stinging insects—is a small fear compared to the others that all of us suffer.

Every time they come up with one of those surveys of people's fears, they say that the biggest, most profound, and most common fear among people is the fear of public speaking. But that is not true. When they examine the results of the survey more closely, they discover that the worst fear we all have is that something bad—some tragedy—will happen to someone we love. The second is that we ourselves will be made dysfunctional by age or happenstance and become a burden to our family.

These are the fears we all share. We are not alone, and it is not fear itself but paralysis and overreaction that the gospel writer is trying to save us from.

The boat in the storm is Matthew's metaphor for all the dangers and problems that life throws at us, and the sane, rational, prudent response will always be fear. The response Jesus offers is not an alternative to fear, but a way of living that goes through and beyond fear to faith.

He doesn't stand safely on the shore and call us to walk on the water. He is walking there himself, and he calls us to walk with him. And should we, for a moment, lose our focus, he is there to offer his hand, to lift us up, to help us back into the boat with a word of encouragement—or maybe a little friendly ribbing.

AMEN