

## What God Wants to Know: Why Are You Afraid?

Exodus 14:10-15

Mark 4:35-41

As we continue our series on what God wants to know—the questions that God asks people in the Bible—our text, with the questions Jesus asks this morning, is a familiar one, and so appropriate for our time.

*On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be Still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”*

This is the word of the Lord.

This morning’s question is a perennial one, as it addresses an experience, or an emotion—some would say it’s more of a thought that *leads to* a feeling—that arises for many people in a myriad of circumstances: fear. And we may as well toss in worry and anxiety while we’re at it, since they kind of come as a package deal. The Bible talks about all of this, a lot.

In January 6, 2016 TIME Magazine’s cover issue—first of the new year that year—was “Why Americans are More Afraid Than They Used to Be.” And that

was before the presidential primaries and election in 2016! Since that election, much more has been (and is being) written about fear in our culture.

However, I was glad to re-read a short blog post by a young adult/millennial, who—reflecting on the Mark passage we just heard—said (in summary): “We have to stop being afraid all the time. We must stop giving in to fear.” His name is John Pavlovitz, who is a pastor, and he wrote a book titled, *“Hope, and Other Superpowers.”* Great title! Hope is an antidote to fear, he says, and in one of his recent blog posts he said, “Instead of only lamenting how horrible everything is, accept the invitation to make it less horrible.” And one way we do that is by saying no to fear, and yes to loving our neighbor in whatever small ways we can. These and other authors are saying, “We have to stop giving in to fear.”

Now, as much as I agree with what John Pavlovitz is saying, I also want to say in response, “That’s easier said than done!” for a lot of people. Especially these days. Even in reflecting on our gospel story this morning, when Jesus asks, “Why are you afraid?” my response—if I were one of the disciples in the boat—would be, “Are you kidding?! The boat is about to sink, we don’t know to swim, and you’ve been asleep this whole time. Of course we’re afraid!” And if we can imagine Jesus asking this question today to us (why are you afraid?), the response

could be: let me count the reasons! Because we not only have multiple issues at play in our country and our world, we have the perennial age-old fears like death, and spiders.

As I reflect on this story from the gospel, and try to picture it in my mind as if I'm watching a scene from a show or a movie, where we can see facial expressions and body language, and hear the speakers' tone of voice, I can imagine a certain look of terror on the disciples' faces, and a sense of urgency on their part as they raise their voices to wake Jesus up. Then, upon being awakened, Jesus's response to the disciples seems to be one of frustration. Jesus seems to scold them. Did you get that sense from his response to them? He stills the storm, the wind and waves become calm, which calms their fear. That's reassuring. But then he kind of rebukes them with a couple questions—Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? That doesn't seem, on the surface, like the compassionate Jesus that we know and love. Maybe we expected him to pat them on the back and say, "There, there; everything's going to be okay."

Makes me wonder, what did Jesus expect them to do? Did he expect *them* to still the storm? Or was he grumpy, because they startled him awake out of a deep sleep by frantically yelling in his ear?

I mean, was it completely unreasonable for them to be afraid? Think about it—many of these guys in the boat with Jesus are seasoned fishermen and boaters. They're not afraid of a *little* bad weather—it happened a lot on the Sea of Galilee; squalls would come up without warning; that wasn't unusual. So this storm must have been unusually big and bad to scare these guys the way it did. So their fear makes sense to me in terms of the storm. They could drown. That was a very real possibility. So what's up with Jesus' questions?

Here's what I think Jesus is getting at by asking these questions:

I think what he expected from his disciples was that they would indeed wake him up and ask him to still the storm, but that they would have enough faith ***that Jesus cared about them*** that they wouldn't be so freaked out in the process. Their lack of faith here was not in his ability, but a lack of faith in his heart. In his care for them.

Notice their question to him when they wake him up: "*Do you not care... that we are perishing?*" Do you not care? I think that's what Jesus was getting at with his questions. The disciples were probably not questioning Jesus' power or ability, but his heart. They woke him up because they knew he could do *something*. They had seen his miracles. But they questioned his heart. You can

imagine them saying, “If you really cared about us, you would not have stayed asleep; you would’ve been aware of the situation, woken up, and done something. And since you didn’t wake up to do something right away, we’re not sure you really care.” Does this sound familiar to you? It does to me! Where we may think or say, “Hey God, since you’re not dropping everything, hurrying up, and fixing my situation *right now*, this must mean you don’t care.”

And I think at the heart of fear for us—that is, when fear begins to have more sway than faith—at the heart of that is the question, “Does God truly care?” Like the disciples, in the storms of our life we may be truly asking, “Lord, do you care enough about me to do something about what’s going on in my life?” “Do you not care about \_\_\_\_\_?”

We can expand this beyond ourselves to what’s happening in our communities and in the world: Jesus, do you not care that more and more people can’t afford housing? Do you not care that innocent children are perishing in Gaza and Israel? And Sudan, and Ukraine?

I think of how many people in our society are asking, “Do you not care that I feel lonely and isolated in our highly individualistic and mobile society?”

And when Jesus responds with, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” I don’t believe that he’s scolding or grumpy. He wants us to remember that he is with us, and that he does care.

The faith that Jesus asks us to have in the midst of our fears is more than just faith that he **can** do something, but first and foremost, faith and trust that **he loves you** and cares about you. The faith that Jesus asks us to have in the midst of our fears is more than just faith that he **can** do something, but first and foremost, faith and trust that **he loves you** and cares about you.

Clearly, Jesus desired to still the storm. But his main desire was to have his disciples trust his heart and his goodness. It’s the same for us. Jesus desires to help us in our troubles; **and**, his desire is for us to have a disposition of heart and mind that trusts his heart, so we don’t get overtaken by fear, because we’re confident of our God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. In spite of fearsome circumstances. Because...

Notice that here, and every place where Jesus talks about fear, he never said, “There is nothing to be afraid of.” He never says that. In fact, in John’s gospel Jesus says, plainly, “In this world you will have trouble.” He’s realistic about life. But the second half of that sentence is, “But fear not; I have overcome

the world.” In other words, the fearsome things we face are real, but they are not faced alone, ever, because Jesus is always with us, and, those fearsome things don’t have the last word. *Jesus* has the last word. Nothing can separate us from his love.

Our problem is that we sometimes do what the disciples and others in the stories of the Bible did: instead of taking faith to a problem, we sometimes take a magnifying glass to it. We take things that realistically aren’t that big of a deal, and we *make* a big deal out of them. That’s what fear does; fear acts like a magnifying glass and makes things look so big that we can become overwhelmed. And then it’s hard to have faith. The bible tells us to magnify the Lord, not magnify our problems.

So, faith helps to keep things right-sized. Small matters stay small; God stays as big as God truly is. When we can move *beyond* fear, *work through* fear, faith helps us to trust that when all is said and done, Jesus is powerful to calm storms and bring peace and create a way forward.

So, Jesus’ question “Why are you afraid?” might be reframed as, “What will be your response to the storms?” We can give in to fear, or we can take courage and have faith, and turn again to the Lord of the wind and the waves, the One we trust to be more powerful than the storms. We are invited to discover forgotten

courage in ourselves, to help us live beyond fear. I don't think we ever banish fear completely, but we can learn to live through it, or beyond it, in courage and faith.

This is what Moses called the people to in the Exodus story, following their redemption from slavery and journey out of Egypt. It's a similar situation to our gospel story. As the people are understandably afraid—freaking out, actually—with the Egyptians in hot pursuit from behind, and the Red Sea in front of them, wondering “Now what?!?” With snarky questions that they brought to Moses (“Wasn't the cemetery big enough in Egypt for all of us to be buried in, since we're all going to die out here?") I appreciate their sarcasm. It's funny.

Moses patiently and compassionately stands in the gap and tells the people: “Don't be afraid. God will make a way.” Then he says, “You only need to be still.” Be still?!? Are you kidding me? That sounds ridiculous in this situation. But stillness here doesn't mean **stand** still and do nothing. It means silence the voices of doubt within; take a deep breath, and stop agitating inwardly, so you can quiet yourself enough to find your courage and faith. “Be still” here means quiet your mind and heart; silence the voices within. “The Lord will fight for you,” he says. I love that line... the Lord will fight for you. You only need be still and see it. Quiet yourself so you can see and hear clearly.



Moses could've said a whole lot of other things to the complaining people there. He could've said, "Fine; go back to Egypt; see if I care. Ungrateful people!" No, Moses is a good leader; he sees that they are afraid and he keeps them encouraged. And, he himself has faith on their behalf. He trusts that God will act and encourages them to follow. That's faith! And good leadership. And true courage—taking action in spite of fear. Having faith in spite of fear. I'm sure Moses was afraid too. He just, in that moment, summoned his faith and courage.

Then God himself intervenes and tells Moses to tell the people: go forward! Get moving! Move on! Don't become paralyzed by how awful you think your situation is, or by uncertainty. Don't awfulize this (with the magnifying glass of fear). Don't let fear immobilize you. God will make a way.

And God did make a way. We know how this story ends. Or, rather, begins. This is just the beginning of their story as a free people. As God makes a way, at the last minute, and God's people pass through danger and land safely on the other side, to begin a new journey.

This all reminds me of a great story from one of my favorite writers, Parker Palmer. Parker Palmer is a Quaker man who has written beautifully about faith and spirituality, and about education.

He tells the story of a time in midlife when he felt like his life needed a little shakeup. So he signed up for a week-long Outward Bound course. He tells the story best (from *Let Your Life Speak*, pgs. 82-85):

“I chose the weeklong course at Hurricane Island, off the coast of Maine. I should have known from that name what was in store for me; next time I will sign up for the course at Happy Gardens or Pleasant Valley! Though it was a week of great learning, deep community, and genuine growth, it was also a week of fear and loathing.

In the middle of that week, I faced the challenge I feared most. One of our instructors backed me up to the edge of a cliff 110 feet above solid ground. He tied a very thin rope to my waist—and rope that looked ill-kempt to me and seemed to be starting to unravel—and told me to start “rappelling” down that cliff.

“Do what?” I said.

“Just go!” the instructor explained.

So, I went—and immediately slammed into a ledge, some four feet down from the edge of the cliff, with bone-jarring, brain-jarring force.

The instructor looked down at me: “I don’t think you’ve quite got it.”

“Right,” said I, being in no position to disagree. “So, what am I supposed to do?”

“The only way to do this,” he said, “is to lean back as far as you can. You have to get your body at right angles to the cliff so that your weight will be on your feet. It’s counterintuitive, but it’s the only way that works.”

I knew that he was wrong, of course. I knew that the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as I could. So I tried again, my way—and slammed into the next ledge, another four feet down.

“You still don’t have it,” the instructor said, helpfully.

“OK,” I said, “tell me again what I am supposed to do.”

“Lean way back,” said he, “and take the next step.”

The next step was a very big one, but I took it—and, wonder of wonders, it worked. I leaned back into empty space, eyes fixed on the heavens in prayer, made tiny, tiny moves with my feet, and started descending down the rock face, gaining confidence with every step.

I was about halfway down when the second instructor called up from below: “Parker, I think you’d better stop and see what’s just below your feet.” I lowered my eyes very slowly, so as not to shift my weight, and saw that I was approaching a deep hole in the face of the rock.

To get down, I would have to get around that hole, which meant I could not maintain the straight line of descent I had started to get comfortable with. I would need to change course and swing myself around that hole, to the left or to the right. I knew for a certainty that attempting to do so would lead directly to my death—so I froze, paralyzed with fear.

The second instructor let me hang there, trembling, in silence, for what seemed like a very long time. Finally, she shouted up these helpful words: “Parker, is anything wrong?”

To this day I do not know where my words came from, though I have twelve witnesses to the fact that I spoke them. In a high, squeaky voice, I said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then,” said the instructor, “it’s time that you learned the Outward Bound motto!”

“Oh great,” I thought. “I’m about to die, and she’s going to give me a motto!”

But then she shouted ten words I hope never to forget, words whose impact and meaning I can still feel: “If you can’t get out of it, get into it!”

I had long believed in the concept of “the word become flesh,” but until that moment, I had not experienced it. My teacher spoke words so compelling that they bypassed my mind, went into my flesh, and animated my legs and feet. No helicopter would come to rescue me; the instructor on the cliff would not pull me up with the rope; there was no parachute in my backpack to float me to the ground. There was no way out of my dilemma except to get into it—so my feet started to move, and in a few minutes I made it safely down.”

If you can't get out of it, get into it. I don't know if you feel like you're dangling off of a cliff these days, but certainly we are, collectively, living through a storm—a cultural storm, and a worldwide storm of change and transition and turmoil. We can't get out of it. Therefore, what might “getting into it” look like for us?

Like the disciples, like Moses and the people of God of old, we will often need to still ourselves first—to quiet the chatter going on inside of us, so we can hear the voice of the One who still knows how to calm the wind and the waves, to help us find forgotten courage, and... get into it; whatever that looks like for each of us, and for us collectively.

One last thought:

At a Session meeting here at MPC a couple years ago, toward the end of the covid shutdown, when the elders were working on our reopening plan, a comment was made that I'm sure was made all over the world during covid. It was the simple comment that, “We're all in the same boat,” with regard to the pandemic. We often use that phrase, don't we? “We're all in the same boat.” One of our wise elders, John Collier, responded to that with words that have stuck with me and have helped my thinking over the years. He said, “We *aren't* in the same boat. We're in the same *storm*. But we're not all the same boat because

some people have bigger or stronger boats than others, and some don't have a boat at all. So we're in the same storm, but not the same boat. (Btw, if you want to learn about why some people don't have a boat, or a very small one, come to the Poverty 101 class! You can still sign up).

To come full circle—if we want to, as John Pavlovitz says, say no to fear and say yes to loving our neighbor, if we want to “get into it” if we can't get out of it, one way we can do that is to become aware of who needs help weathering the storm right now. Because where the many people are praying and asking God, “Do you not care...?” we can be the calm they are praying for, and represent the care that God desires to show to them. In fact, I believe that is part of the calling for God's people today: to be the calm, to become peace for others in the midst of the storm. As a result of the spiritual resources that we possess and can always call upon to still and calm ourselves.

In a real sense, *we are* the storm—political strife, war, and even climate change are human-caused storms. So, we are the storm. But we have the opportunity to be the calm; to be the peace for a world, a community, a neighborhood, or a household that needs peace.