

# *Faith and Fear*

*I John 4:16-19 and Matthew 14:22-33*

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Given the number of mind-bending stories it tells, the Bible can be a challenging book for us modern-minded people to take seriously. Think of the stories you remember from your childhood - the story in Exodus of the day the sea is turned into dry land, and a whole nation of refugees walks across its bed to freedom. In Joshua, the shout from the crowd sends the walls of a great city tumbling down. In the Gospel of John, a man named Lazarus, dead for days, comes back to life. All across the pages of scripture, the lame are walking, the blind are recovering their sight, the banished are being restored to community. The light keeps on shining in the darkness and is never overcome. Jesus, son of a carpenter from Nazareth, is said to be responsible for most of the aforementioned miracles.

What do you think about all of that? To me, the challenge of faith has little if anything to do with my taking these things literally, and everything to do with my taking them seriously. None of the stories the Bible tells is told for its own sake, so as to make us marvel, as one would marvel at the execution of a magic trick. The stories are told to reveal a larger reality. They are told to show us the truth about God and the reality of the presence and power of God at work in human life, in human society, and in the universe, in ways that shatter all our present categories and assumptions.

An insightful friend once said that it doesn't make a bit of difference whether you believe there was a talking snake in the Garden of Eden, or even that there was a Garden of Eden, but it makes all the difference in the world whether you believe what the snake said. The stories the Bible tells are indispensable to human existence, not on the basis of their being literally true, but on the basis of their being eternally true. Nothing else will save us from coming to the ruinous conclusion that there is no such thing as divine mercy and grace and forgiveness, no such thing as the divine power to heal and mend and save, no such thing as life beyond death, no other possibilities besides the possibilities we mortals make possible.

Today I want to ask you to consider taking the Bible seriously. I want you to consider taking seriously the story Matthew tells of the night that Jesus walked on the water and did not sink. I know it is asking a lot to ask a thing like this of you. The disciples had a hard time believing it. They thought the one walking toward them across the Sea of Galilee was a ghost. I guess in some situations, it is less mind-boggling to believe in ghosts than to believe in the loving, sustaining presence of God. In the disciples' defense, it must be said that it is very difficult to see anything clearly in the dark, and there is no darker time in the night than early in the morning. In the Greek, "early in the morning" translates as the "fourth watch." To the ancient sailors, the fourth watch was that period of time between 3:00 in the morning and 6:00 in the morning - the darkest time of the night.

Even the most reasonable among us have been known to think unreasonable thoughts and come to unreasonable conclusions when we are alone with our thoughts and fears, with only the hum of the refrigerator, the occasional rumble of a truck, and

our dubious assumptions to keep us company. Sillier things than ghosts can seem real in the dark of the night. And what could be a more frightening place than far from land, surrounded by black water, which the wind is licking up in surging waves against your boat?

I feel defensive of the disciples. Of course, they didn't get it. Besides, they were tired and worn out. On shore, the crowds had pressed in all day long. Jesus had been maddeningly unconcerned about the scarcity of food and all those hungry people - two fish, five loaves of bread, 5,000 men plus the women and the children. (That's the way the Bible counted.) By afternoon everybody had been fed, with twelve basketfuls of leftovers, but it had been a long, stressful day. Jesus himself was tired. After he had dismissed the crowds, he "went off by himself to pray. Jesus made the disciples get into the boat to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee."

Do not let that expression "made them go" fool you into thinking that Jesus was being insensitive to the needs of his dearest friends. Having fed the multitudes, he now was turning to the needs of those closest to him. Confident that rowing and fishing and resting on the opposite shore would be just the thing to replenish the spirits of those fishermen who had spent most of their lives on the sea, just as praying would replenish him, Jesus sent them on. But while he was praying, and when the disciples' boat was more than a mile away from land, the wind came up, and waves began to batter their boat. Whatever else you believe about the rest of this story, surely you believe this part: that the wind was against them. This, we know for a fact, can happen. The wind can be against us. We know it from personal experience or, if not yet, will know it before our life is done.

Someone spoke to me recently about her frustration in making any progress on a community-building challenge we are working on at Trinity. She said, "It seems as if we keep trying to push the string uphill." That is another way of saying the wind is against you. You have had days like that, weeks like that, years like that. You take one step forward and four steps backward. The wind is against you. It takes an enormous amount of energy just to stay where you are and not lose ground. Not to fall back. To hold on.

Much of life is lived against the wind. It was precisely when his disciples were rowing for dear life - against the wind - that Jesus came walking toward them on the sea, and they were terrified. It is at this point that the story asks its most piercing question of us, and what it wants to know is this: Do we believe that at the darkest and most exhausting places in our lives, there will be strength and peace enough to see us through?

"Take heart," Jesus said, "be not afraid. It is I."

In the tempest-tossed little boat, the disciples sat. Across the water came the words, "Be not afraid, I am here."

"Be not afraid." It is easier said than done, especially since there seems to be so much to fear. Fear of death; fear of life, sometimes even more fearful than death; fear of the other; fear of the outsider; fear of the alien, the one who is different from you; fear of cancer; fear of crime; fear of AIDS. Fear can get ahead of you, and cause you to act in inappropriate ways. What besides fear could have made the Secret Service people at the White House forget their manners and break out the rubber gloves when they read the guest list for the day and learned that leaders from the gay community were coming to call on the President?

What else but fear would be potent enough to fuel the hatred and paranoia that marks the militia movement in America? In a recent profile of the Montana Militia, Michael Kelly introduces its leader, a white-bearded, firm-mouthed fellow with a hard glare to his eyes. He has been on a life-long search, Kelly writes, “for order and defense against the dangers of the world.” He is, in fact, a second-generation conspiracist. The militia leader says, “I was nine years old when I first took note of something being wrong, and that was when my dad refused to be part of the Lutheran Church any more, because they had joined the National Council of Churches....”<sup>1</sup>

Fear can get ahead of us. Fear of being controlled, fear of losing control - to a greater or lesser extent, it is a part of all of us. We want to control the future, and even if we can't control it, we are worried about it. What if this happens? What if that happens? Some of us are afraid of being alone, others of being intimate. Many fear not having enough. “Getting and spending - we lay waste our powers,” Wordsworth wrote. We defend and secure and make sure we have more, sometimes to our own hurt.

There is a wonderful Texas story about two little boys whose mother asked them to chase a chicken snake out of the henhouse. They looked everywhere for that snake, but couldn't find it. The more they looked, the more afraid they got. Finally, they stood up on their tiptoes to look on the top nesting shelf and came nose to nose with the snake. They fell all over themselves and one another running out of the chicken house. “Don't you know a chicken snake won't hurt you?” their mamma asked. “Yes, ma'am,” one of the boys answered, “but there are some things that will scare you so bad you'll hurt yourself.”

Think about American society. The more fearful we become, the more likely we are to hurt ourselves in the process of protecting ourselves. Trust, civility, freedom are usually among the first casualties of fear. And what about our whole souls? Fear marks so many human hearts.

I am drawn to John Cheever's haunting phrase, his description of fear as a “taste of a rusty knife.”

Will she love me?

Will I die?

Will my enemy prosper?

Will I lose my job?

Will the bomb drop?

Will the money run out?

What the story of Jesus' walking on water wants to know is exactly the opposite. This story wants to know, will we let our fears defeat us? “Take heart; be not afraid,” Jesus said to Peter. Peter wanted to believe that was true, but he was only half-convinced. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus said, “Come.” (Faith, after all, does not mean sitting on your hands.) Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he started paying attention to the strength of the wind that was against him, instead of to the one in whose love he was held, he became undone and began to sink, while he cried out, “Lord, save me!” I find this part of the story very believable, as well.

A teenager once told her father, “You'll never learn to dance if you're always thinking about how you look on the dance floor.” You and I will never learn to live if we pay too much attention to all that is working against us. We will sink for sure!

Now, the truth is that there is not always a lot we can do against that which does

not wish us well - except to keep from giving it more power than it deserves, except to trust that there is a power greater than all that would try to do us in, except to ask for help when we need it, as Peter did. "Lord, save me!" he cried. As soon as he asked, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'"

I can answer that question for Peter. I know why he doubted. Who does not know about those times in life when doubt seem the only sensible response to the situation at hand? Times when there is every reason in the world to believe that what threatens to sink us *will sink us*. In this story, it was not the storm that sank Peter. It was fear and his inability to believe in the sustaining presence of God in the midst of the storm.

William James, father of the school of philosophy known as pragmatism, once wrote: "Faith is the force in life and when it is absent, life collapses." I believe the converse is equally true. Fear is the force in death, and when it has us in its grip, we are like Houdini, under water in a trunk with no key, no light, no air, no freedom, no tomorrow. Desperate but unable to save himself, Peter grasped the hand Jesus offered, and when they got into the boat, "the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'" I know that this is hard for us to imagine: God here in our world, in the depth of our need. This is a reality only faith can know. This is the reality that is told by the ancient stories that scripture tells. We cannot do a thing in the world about our lives' being difficult. Such is the nature of much of human existence. We were never promised it would be otherwise. We can only do something about how we handle the dark moment, the difficulty, the fear that brings paralysis to the human soul.

Faith is not the absence of fear, but the courage to walk through the fear; to take the hand that is offered. To be courageous is not to be fearless; it is to be able to act in spite of fear. Fear is morally neutral. It has nothing to do with your character. It just shows up in response to a real or an imagined danger. We cannot control whether or not we are going to be visited by fear, but we can decide whether or not we are going to invite fear in and let it live in our hearts and control what we do. I imagine that all of us are afraid of something - spiders, snakes, airplanes, ghosts, germs. The disciples were afraid it simply was too good to be true - the reality of the sustaining presence of God in their darkest hour.

Doesn't it amaze you that our modern minds are so intrigued by and drawn to the silliest things - UFO's, channeling, reincarnation, ouija boards, horoscopes, tarot cards, the spirit of Elvis Presley. People seem to be able to believe any of that stuff, but are too sophisticated to accept the promise of these stories that God is love, "that love casts out fear." Every day we decide again which it will be for us - whether it will be faith, or whether it will be fear. This is the point and counterpoint of human existence. Every day we decide again, whether or not we believe more deeply in the winds that blow against us or in the power that can keep us steady in the face of the wind.

How odd it is that our technologically brilliant age is marked by an unparalleled abundance of fear and an unprecedented lack of faith. We have lost sight of the profound truth articulated so eloquently years ago by Harry Emerson Fosdick:

Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless,

faith makes serviceable; and most of all fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God.

I am not asking you to believe that Jesus walked on water, but I am asking you to at least entertain the possibility that there is one who is present in the fiercest storms and in the darkest nights, one who will not let you sink, not now, not ever. If you get to the place where you can believe a thing like that, it will be the miracle of your life. I am convinced that miracles like that happen every day.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Michael Kelly, "The Road to Paranoia," *The New Yorker*, 19 June 1995, 70.