

Proper VII Year B: 23/24 June 2018  
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
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**“Why are you afraid?” Jesus asks...But notice Jesus doesn't say there isn't anything to be afraid of.**

Jon 38: 1-11  
2 Corinthians 6: 1-13  
Mark 4: 35-41  
Psalm 107: 1-3, 23-32

*“Jesus was facing down fear with faith. Faith that God is always present; faith that God is always in the midst of life's tribulation, faith that God is always working for justice and peace.”*

“Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily life is but a dream.” This simple melodic childhood limerick is what came to mind as I consider Jesus' disciples who were fishermen. I imagine them as being seasoned seafarers who know the waters and can handle the various weather situations that may arise when one is out in a boat on the seas. What often starts out as calm waters can, however, soon turn tumultuous and test the mantel of any sailor's worthiness. That's what I imagined Jesus' followers to be, stalwart individuals who have been tested and proven true upon the sea; not individuals who cower in fear as the waters they sail upon turn violent.

Fear is a natural human emotion, so we ought not be too concerned about the disciples becoming fearful as their boat was being swamped by wind driven waves. After all, who hasn't had the experience of well thought out plans unfurling in unexpected ways; of events not going according to our schedules; of surprise situations arising in the midst of well-ordered intentions. We fear the unknown. We fear what we can't control. The disciples are no different, at least according to this story.

They are on the water for a reason: they are going to the other side. The Sea of Galilee is both a metaphorical and physically real barrier between two groups of people: Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is leaving the surety of his shared Jewish identity and journeying to “the other side,” where he will be a stranger in a foreign land, a land Jews stayed away from. Water is a natural boundary between these two groups, and Jesus has his mind set on crossing that boundary. Jesus is being true to form always crossing boundaries erected by human inclination and fear: fear of the stranger, fear of the other, fear of difference. No matter what language you couch that in, it’s fear that separates us into various groupings and subgroups. That, however, doesn’t stop Jesus from crossing them and in doing so highlights the folly of human nature to separate tribally.

But the journey from one side to the other, from one way of understanding to another, is fraught with challenges. Powers, seemingly often beyond our control, establish rules and regulations, laws and edicts all in an effort to bring order and justification to separating into factions. Call it gender expectation, social class division, nationalism, ethnic segregation – call it whatever you want, it’s still division into factions with indivisible boundaries separating the situation. In this story, water is that which divides and isn’t meant to be crossed.

Water is a primal element that is both life giving and life threatening. We can’t live without water, yet water holds the potential to cause great destruction. Hearing about the sea in this reading corresponds to water in the creation narratives of Genesis. What brought order out of chaos in those narratives, is God’s word, and what calms the sea in today’s story is Jesus’ words. And it tells me something: when faced with fear, faith is the answer. It isn’t the disciple’s faith in their own abilities that weather the storm, it’s their faith in Jesus who calms their fear and anxiety.

“Why are you afraid?” Jesus asks. An innocuous question most of us have heard at some point in our own lives. But notice Jesus doesn’t say there isn’t anything to be afraid of. There’s nothing to be afraid of is a phrase that rolls off of people’s tongues often and we know that it isn’t exactly true. There are things to fear in life, and Jesus is well aware of that. People can be afraid of change, of disapproval, of rejection or failure. In our current cultural milieu of the binary conservative / liberal dichotomy anything outside of accepted norms threatens

repercussions. And we often never question who created those norms, who benefits from them and who is harmed by them. Jesus was aware that even in his day and age, certain people were to be avoided, certain behavior punished, and the alien casted aside. Ask any person of color if there isn't something to fear in our present-day culture. Ask a Native American if there is nothing to be afraid of in North or South America. LGBTQ+ individuals often live in fear for the safety of their lives and the lives of loved ones. Ask any refugee if there is nothing to fear. There is much to fear and there are countless boundaries to foster and fuel such fear. But Jesus asks us to name our fear, knowing that fear is real.

Jesus is understood by many who are disenfranchised and marginalized by government and religion alike, as the liberating force that calms their fears and anxieties. Jesus is aware of the divisiveness of politics and religion. It existed in his time as it still does today. Yet Jesus willingly moved to cross the boundaries that divided people and cultures into us versus them dichotomies. Addressing injustice was Jesus' normative behavior and it was at odds with his religion and social culture. He dared to question, even provoke the establishment, towards self-reflection. What are you afraid of is part of Jesus' attempt to guide his disciples, to guide us, into asking those questions that will shed light upon the injustices of the times we find ourselves in.

It was unquestionable for Jesus to go to the other side. It was fraught with danger – rejection and discrimination were real threats. Yet, Jesus wanted to cross to the other side and set course upon the natural boundary that divided people. Jesus was facing down fear with faith. Faith that God is always present; faith that God is always in the midst of life's tribulation, faith that God is always working for justice and peace. That is what I hear in the old spirituals the African slaves sang: that Jesus will carry them through the trails of slavery, that he has been through death itself and prevailed. Those old Black spirituals speak of God's presence among the downtrodden, suffering as they suffer, through which God will prevail. We have only to have faith and perseverance until justice rolls down from heaven. Until then, we must act in ways that help liberate those held captive to fear of oppression and violence, for those are real fears many people face every day.

I believe that religion and morality without ethics leads to a society without empathy. Jesus had great empathy for those on the margins, the downcast, those without voice, and those seen as having no value in their culture or community. Jesus was ready and willing to cross any divide, any boundary to bring a message of compassion and love. I fear that we, as a people, are becoming apathetic. Too many of us in today's culture are showing an unwillingness to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others. Those in positions of privilege and power claim to be victims of reverse discrimination. They wrote the rules and edicts that fostered deep divisions and when those disempowered claim their voice and turn those rules back on the powers that be, the privileged and wealthy become fearful. They are fearful of retribution for they know that those rules have been misused against the poor, against people of color, against Native Americans, against gender expression and sexual identity. The boundaries are being crossed and those who have claimed unearned privilege are fearful. Yet, Jesus asks: why are you afraid?

We must cross the divide of indifference and apathy with faith that God is working to restore relationships and not foster retribution. Jesus crossed the sea that day, seeking to reach those who were deemed the "other" in order to bring a message of hope, a promise for a better tomorrow where divisions will be healed and the brokenhearted lifted up; where war is no more and an equitable distribution of resources will prevail. Where there's human chaos brought on by selfishness, greed, and fear, Jesus brings order. Like the disciples, we can't trust in our own abilities, but must have faith in Jesus that God is at work in the world striving for justice and peace. The question then becomes this: Do we have the courage of faith to get in the boat with Jesus and cross over to the other side? Or will we let fear stop us from doing so?