

**Why are you Afraid? Faith vs. Fear** Reading: Mark 4:35-41 Proper 7/B 6/23/24  
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Jesus said to his disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (Mark 4:40-41)

In the early evening in the summer of 1997, I was driving my 9-year-old niece and her two girlfriends home from the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. The girls were singing and laughing in the back seat of my car, recounting the highlights of that day. The traffic driving home on highway 17 was heavy, going about 65 miles per hour. Suddenly, a large box flew out of the back of a pickup truck about 30 yards ahead of me. Within seconds, the car behind the pickup truck hit the box, spun around, and started to aim in my direction. Immediately, I pulled over to the far right of the road, hoping to avoid an accident. But her car kept coming at me and there was nothing I could do to escape the impending crash.

It is amazing how many thoughts can go through your mind in just a few milliseconds. I thought about my powerlessness and the futility of it all. I thought about the 3 young girls in the back seat whose lives would soon be snuffed out. I was mostly angry, although anger is a secondary emotion of fear. And just before that car was about to crash into mine, I yelled out: “We are all going to die!” And then there was silence!!! Miraculously, the car screeched to a halt about 2 inches before hitting my front bumper. Well, as you can see, we all made it out alive but I will never forget the emotion of that traumatic incident. Had Jesus been in the car with us, I (like the disciples), would probably have said: “Do you not care that we are perishing?”

What I would like to talk about today is faith versus fear. Today’s reading from the gospel of Mark recounts a miracle story of Jesus calming a raging sea some 2000 years ago. The visceral response of the terrified disciples in a boat ready to capsize resonates with many of us today as individuals, congregations, and communities throughout the world face real dangers and even extinction. Fear is one of the most powerful emotions. It has a very strong effect on our mind and body. It’s a human response that is vital for our survival. It helps us respond to emergencies or dangerous situations. For example, if there is a fire or we’re being attacked or drowning in the ocean, we are programmed to fight or flee in the face of fear.

We live in frightening times. We, like the disciples in the boat, are being swamped, terrified that God has gone AWOL. We are afraid of many things such as war and violence, climate change, inflation, and the loss of human rights. We are afraid of the threats to our democracy, of losing our health care benefits, of being alone, of not having enough money to last throughout our old age, of debilitating illnesses, the demise of the communities we cherish, of our own death and the death of those we love. The perils of life are real.

Fear can also occur in every-day affairs in the form of anxiety: A response to non-life-threatening events like exams, public speaking, a job interview, a date, or even a party. Anxiety is a natural reaction to events that put you under pressure. It is a feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness that might cause you to sweat, feel restless and tense, and have a rapid heartbeat. It can be a normal reaction to stress. But when anxiety takes up too much of one’s emotional state, it is harmful both to the immune system and one’s mental health. This is where the importance of a life steeped in faith comes in.

Faith comes from the Greek word, *pistis*, meaning trust. Faith is not an intellectual belief in a list of doctrines but rather a posture of trust in something that will ultimately save us. From a spiritual point of view, faith is a courageous trust in life, and by implication trust in the Source of life. In more religious terms, faith is a commitment, allegiance, and attentiveness to our relationship with God. It is a trust that is so deep that it liberates us from anxiety. “Faith is the bird that sings when the dawn is dark.” “Faith makes things possible, not easy.” “Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered & lo, no one was there.” “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Faith is the having the conviction that with God, all things become possible. It was this kind of faith that the disciples in the boat lacked. In fact, they ended up blaming Jesus for not caring about their plight.

Jesus said to his disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” The disciples in today’s gospel story, and we as its hearers today, are called to recognize between two vastly different worlds that we might inhabit. We can continue to live in the world of fear and chaos, seeing ourselves orphaned or alone without the power of God, living in a world controlled by the power of fear and anxiety. Or we can be open to hearing the message and promise of Jesus. This is the One through whom we are told that the kingdom of God has come into our midst and now offers a whole new future for our world and for our lives.

The good news is, “if you have faith the size of a mustard seed...nothing will be impossible for you.” (Mt 17:20) The bad news is, our faith waxes and wanes. “Faith is like an oscillating fan: veering from one extreme to another, caught for a time by us weak mortals and then slipping from our grasp” when stuff hits the fan. The good news is, “if you have faith the size of a mustard seed...nothing will be impossible for you.” The bad news is, that it is difficult to develop such a trust in God especially if as a child you were deeply traumatized, or your parents were not trustworthy. So how do we cultivate a life of faith in this uncertain world of ours?

For some people, faith is a gift. It comes naturally and is like a sturdy life-vest floating them through the waves and riptides of life. For others like myself, it takes discipline to cultivate and deepen my faith in God, the Source of Life. Here are a few faith-building strategies that I would like to share with you; ones which I utilize in my own journey of faith.

1. **Name your fears!** Confront those fears, be specific, analyze them, and then strategically address them. Why are you afraid? Don't let some vague dark cloud hover over you, perpetuating your anxiety. Challenge those inner voices that are urging you to run away, or hide, or freeze until the trouble has gone by.
2. **Hang out with people who are faith-filled** and limit your time with those who are cynical or divisive. In one of my first assignments as a priest, I met a local woman who was a Christian Scientist, interested in the healing ministries. We quickly became friends. One day as we were out for a walk, she told me that she could no longer maintain her house and was moving out of town. I felt sorry for her and was about to say something when she turned to me with a smile and said: “Isn't the Father wonderful. Look at all this beauty around us that God has created!” These are the kind of people who inspire my faith. How about you?
3. **Put limits on your exposure to the nightly news.** As you might know, the main mission of the news-media today (whether in print or on TV) is to make money, not to offer objective reporting. Money is made based on viewership. The more often you turn on the news, the more money that news channel makes. As a result, the news media tries to portray the daily news as “apocalyptic” in order to keep your attention. While I do keep up with what is going on in the world, I tend to focus much of my time reading books or watching movies that offer hope and increase my faith. Remember: Garbage in, garbage out!
4. **Prayer:** “Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.” Sometimes my prayer is “God, help my unbelief” or “increase my faith.” I would much rather begin my day with Morning Prayer, than to read the New York Times. So I begin the day with allowing the words of the Morning Prayer suffrages to seed my thoughts: “Give peace, O Lord, in all the world; for only in you can we live in safety. Lord, keep this nation under your care; And guide us in the way of justice and truth. Let your way be known upon earth; Your saving health among all nations. Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten...” (BCP 98)
5. **Action:** Instead of allowing the anxiety from bad news get the better of me, I try when possible, to move into action. For instance, instead of being disheartened by the war on the Gaza Strip, I sent money to the Anglican Hospital in the Gaza strip. I have repeatedly written to my congressman, senators, and President to respond to the humanitarian crisis in the region. And of course, I pray for those who suffer.
6. **Death:** I have accepted that I will die. Death is the greatest fear of all! Every one of us here today will die at some point, some earlier than others. Modern medicine cannot keep you alive for ever. So, at some point, you will have to decide when it is time to go naturally. Have you written out your final wishes and shared those with a loved one? If not, what are you afraid of? Steph and I have recently written out our trust and end of life instructions. Since we both have a medical background, we are aware of the hazards of demanding more treatments at the end of life. So we have written specific instructions on when to limit life-support treatments. Our directives also speak of comfort care, pain relief, and spiritual desires at the close of life. If any of you are interested on what kind of instructions to write, I will share this document with you.

“It's not great faith that you need, but faith in a great God. Faith is like a window you look through. It doesn't matter if the window is six feet high or six inches, or just the tiniest peephole in a telescope. What matters is the God that your faith is looking out on.” (Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE)

“Faith is the strength by which a shattered world shall emerge into the light.” (Helen Keller)

“Faith is not simply a patience that passively suffers until the storm is past. Rather it is a spirit that bears things with a blazing serene hope.” (Corazon Aquino)

“Faith is deliberate confidence in the character of God, whose ways you may not understand at the time.” (Oswald Chamber)

“Faith is not something to grasp, it is a state to grow into.” (Mahatma Gandhi)