

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Psalm 105, 1-6, 16-22, 45b
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

There are lots of things that scare me. A spider in the bathtub will do it every time! The idea of someone telling me that I'm going to have to ride Space Mountain in Disney World ... or any other amusement park ride that has a sign that says: "Pregnant women should not go on this ride!" If it's too strenuous for a pregnant woman, then I know it's too strenuous for me. Anything that physically disorients me will strike terror in me. But there are the more subtle and more profound forms of fear, too. I can get frightened if someone I love is very sick and might die. I can get scared if I don't have an income and I'm not sure how I'm going to manage. And I get scared when I hear the news about the frightening things that are going on in the world. It could be the banter among world leaders about the use of nuclear weapons. Or it could be the torchlit march of white supremacists in the dark of night in a nearby town. The KKK and the Nazis scare me. There are lots of things that can scare me. There are probably lots of things out there that can scare you as well.

But how often does Jesus say to us, "Do not be afraid!" It seems we hear that from Jesus on a regular basis. In our gospel lesson this morning we hear that the disciples in the boat were 'terrified' when they saw Jesus walking toward them on the water. They cried out 'in fear.' They didn't even know it was him they were seeing. But Jesus says to them, "Do not be afraid." When Peter was walking on the water toward Jesus, the only time he got into trouble or faltered was when he became frightened again.

PAUSE

'Do not be afraid.' We hear that a lot from Jesus. Jesus knows that we are living in a dangerous world. His world was dangerous as well. And fear is a natural instinct in human beings telling us to be alert ... there's danger here ... pay attention. That feeling of fear that we experience from time to time is, at its most primitive, a self-preservation mechanism. When we are frightened, the adrenalin starts to pump. When we are frightened, the pupils in our eyes dilate so that we can see more and see better. When we are frightened our heart races, pumping blood faster to all parts of our body so that we can protect ourselves. And the faster heartrate sends fresh blood to our brain as well so that we can make good decisions for safety in a heartbeat. The

way our body responds to fear is known as the Fight or Flight response. We will either have the strength and energy to fight if we need to or we have the ability to flee like the wind to stay physically safe. But most of the fears we face now are not from wild animals or even from physical assault. Most of the fears that haunt us will not be mastered by fighting or fleeing. We are stuck with an overload of adrenalin that we sometimes simply refer to as 'stress.' We can't flee and we can't fight, so we need to find other choices of what to do with our fears.

And some of the things we do or say as a result of our fear we can look back on as being motivated or prompted by evil itself. Suppose we are uneasy around someone or suspicious of them and we take a 'pre-emptive' action. It's that mindset that says, 'I'm going to strike you first before you have a chance to strike me!' That's fear talking. And evil is the motivator. Maybe we are afraid that we have been betrayed by someone we love and trust, but rather than carefully gather information, we verbally assault them with accusations that wound them deeply. It's the fear and the hurt that's talking. And evil is the motivator. Maybe we've come to believe that it is a whole group of people who are keeping us from having the life we want simply by existing. It's fear and a sense of powerlessness that provokes the action. And evil is the motivator. Unexamined fear left to run rampant on its own can do great damage ... and damage that we never planned or intended. It's damage that we can see only after the fact.

So how many times do we hear Jesus say to us, "Do not be afraid!" Unleashed fear causes all kinds of harm. And yet, we all have moments of feeling fear ... and very often it's well-founded and justified. The challenge to us as Christians is to bring Jesus into the equation before we act on our fears ... before we do some damage. It's the damage that it evil.

Jesus never claims that if we turn to him we will never be afraid or that we will never get hurt. Quite the contrary. Jesus knows that if we follow him we can be persecuted, ostracized, scorned, perhaps physically assaulted and maybe even lose our lives. Jesus doesn't promise us that evil will never touch us. Jesus calls on us to resist evil ... in ourselves and in other people. Evil is never OK. Jesus' promise to us is that he will never abandon us. And what we know about Jesus is that ... in the end ... he wins over evil ... always ... every time!

When Peter wants to verify that it is Jesus that he sees out on the water... and he wants to be with Jesus ... he calls out to him. Peter wants to be able to walk out on the water to Jesus. He doesn't want to wait for Jesus to get to the boat. His sense of safety is being with Jesus. He knows that he will be able to if Jesus just says the word ... and Jesus does. 'Come,' Jesus says and Peter steps out of the precarious safety of the boat into the guaranteed safety of Jesus ... even though it looks far more dangerous. Jesus beckons us to come as well even though it seems impossible and even though it seems dangerous.

Peter does fine until he gets distracted. He does just fine until he sees all the wind and the turbulence of the water and he takes his eyes off Jesus. How easy it is for us to take our eyes off Jesus. What a temptation it is to look at all the turbulence around us and focus our attention on the things that scare us rather than staying locked into the gaze of Jesus. Have you ever been in trouble and had the chance to stare into someone else's eyes through the rough time? It's a powerful experience and pulls us into the sensation of having someone in there with us if only for a few moments. Imagine how powerful that experience must be if the person gazing into our eyes is Jesus!

But just as Peter falters, Jesus reaches out his hand to save him. He pulls him up and they both get into the boat. Jesus doesn't miss a beat in the midst of all the terrifying distractions that are going on around them. And when they are safely in the boat, all the turbulence dies down. The wind ceases and all is calm. It is then that the disciples know who Jesus really is. Jesus has the power to calm the chaos of the water just as God controlled the chaos of the water in the creation. But Jesus doesn't calm the waters until *after* he and Peter get in the boat. When Jesus calms the turbulence for us, it is in these moments in our own lives that we know who Jesus really is. When we falter ... when we turn our attention to all the disturbing distractions ... when we take our eyes off the prize, Jesus' gaze and his outstretched arm ... we find that Jesus reaches down and grabs us and pulls us to safety ... and peace surrounds us.

Safe at last with Jesus ... in the midst of all the turbulence and fear.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.