

Shawnee Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 28, 2020
“Why are you afraid?”
Rev. Thomas Bartha

Call to Worship

from Psalm 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face.” Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious, holy God, we confess our hesitancy in opening ourselves fully to you, for we know what lies deep within us. We choose to walk at a safe distance, failing to remember that you draw strength out of weakness. By your grace, O God, cleanse, renew, heal and forgive us that we would walk in the way of Christ Jesus our Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Words of Assurance—Lamentations 3:22-24

Matthew 8:23-27

“Why Are You Afraid?”

Why are you afraid? That is the question Jesus puts before us. There are ample reasons for fears in every age. I did some research on common fears, and here are a few:

- Achluophobia--fear of darkness.
- Hyalophobia--fear of glass.
- Ophidiophobia is common: fear of snakes. Closer to home:
- Ecclesiophobia--fear of church. Worse than that:
- Homilophobia--fear of sermons. I do not have that, but I may have a mild case of
- Disposophobia--fear of getting rid of clutter.

Fear of thunder and lightning--Astraphobia. Fear of storms? Brontophobia. That is where we are today. Jesus' disciples follow him into a small boat to sail across the Sea of Galilee. A furious windstorm whips up, so great that the sea shakes, like an earthquake, the boat engulfed by towering waves. I have been in canoes, and even a kayak during a rainstorm, and that is miserable enough. But this is terrifying: the driving winds, and waves crashing in. The disciples are furiously bailing when one of them glances over. There is Jesus, the one who brought them into this boat to begin with, sound asleep. They fear for their lives, and Jesus is asleep!

He has to be drenched from the winds and waves. Is he that exhausted? Or is he simply totally trusting and at peace? Either way it upsets the disciples. "How can you sleep in a storm like this?"

The other gospel stories have them accuse Jesus of indifference: "Lord, don't you care that we are perishing? How can you sleep?" When you are in the midst of chaos and despair, you want to know that someone cares, don't you? They are sure not seeing that in Jesus.

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Doug was a 15 year old high school student who became suddenly ill. After weeks of suffering flu-like symptoms and high fever, it was determined Doug had leukemia. The doctors were frank. For the next three years Doug would undergo chemotherapy. The side effects would be brutal. Some of you know those roads. It hit Doug so hard.

An aunt sent Doug some flowers in the hospital. She told the sales clerk that they were for her teenage nephew who had leukemia. The beautiful flowers arrived. Doug read the note from his aunt, and then he saw a second card tucked in the bouquet. It read, "Douglas, I am the clerk who took your order. I work at the florist shop. I had leukemia when I was seven years old. I am 22 now. Hang in there. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura."

Here was Doug, in one of our nation's finest hospital, with sophisticated medical equipment, being treated by top-notch doctors and nurses with extensive medical training. But it was a sales clerk in a flower shop, who took a moment to care, and who instilled Doug with a deep measure of hope. A breakthrough moment.

The disciples need a breakthrough moment. "Lord save us! We are perishing!" Jesus scans the situation. "Why are you afraid?" Oh, it is more than that. "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"

Little faith? Pull back for a moment, and view this sea storm from another perspective—as a faith community. The disciples in that storm-tossed boat on an angry sea is a portrait of Christ's church in every age, ever shaken by the battering winds and waves of the world. The early church was up against winds of persecution. The church of 1520 or 1920 or 2020 is up against winds of persecution and rejection, dissention and in-fighting, mockery, and all sorts of fears.

Do you hear the urgent cries that have been hurled Jesus' way for centuries: "Lord, we are perishing! We are running out of members. We are losing young people. We are losing older members. We are running low on money. We fear what may happen next, or not happen. What if this terrible virus does not lift? We are running out of patience and trust. We are running low on faith. We are going down, Lord. Save us!"

With the psalm-writer we pray: *Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud. Be gracious to me and answer me. Your face, Lord, do I seek*".

"Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Any time Jesus uses this term—"little faiths"—he is speaking to his followers. Not mockery; Jesus does not operate that way. He speaks into a situation where faith is present, but faltering. The disciples focus only upon the storm, neglecting the Savior who is with them in the thick of it.

Jesus turns and speaks to the sea, rebukes the winds and the waves, and there is sudden dead calm. The waves fold back upon themselves. The sea becomes as glass, the air is still.

The British Navy once had a unique custom. In case of a sudden disaster aboard ship, the "still" was blown. The "still" was a whistle calling the crew to a moment of calm in time of crisis. When the "still" was blown, sailors knew that it meant, "Prepare to do the wise thing." That moment of calm prevented kneejerk reactions, and helped to avert many a catastrophe.

The still... It is life-altering what we can do when we know the value of stillness and practice it, when we do not give in to panic but focus upon Jesus' presence, and his authority over chaos, and we claim his presence for ourselves. How often do we rush headlong into a reaction that calls for stillness? "Lord, I am not sure how this situation will work out. But I do know it is in your hands, the best of all possible hands. Whatever the outcome, I will trust in you."

How different this story would look if Jesus awakened and immediately went into panic mode, slipping around that boat, frantically shoving disciple's aside: "Do this! No, do this...this."

Instead, he calms the storm. Amazement settles upon the disciples, a wonder mixed with fear: *"What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?"*

When our daughters were small, we would take them swimming at the YMCA pool. I would hold one of them in waist deep water, then slowly walk toward the deep. They would cling to my neck, delighted and fearful and trusting at once. What would happen if I let go? What they did not realize is that the water was already over our heads; I was treading water and holding them.

So it is for us. When the winds and waves of life threaten to engulf us, and we know we are in over our heads...Jesus reminds us that we are held in the Father's arms. The one constant amid life's greatest joys and deepest sorrows is the Lord's' presence. Jesus trusts the Father to hold him up, and so can we. *"The Lord is the stronghold of my life..."*

"Who is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" Jesus called us into this boat to begin with, and wherever the journey takes us, no matter how fierce the storms, he never leaves our side. He showed his love in the most powerful way

imaginable, by dying in our place. And now he is alive, victor over death, Lord over the storm. In peace, in chaos, trust him. Call upon his name. Jesus, Savior. Amen.

Gracious Lord, when waves and chaos and confusion threaten to overwhelm, you hold us secure. When our fears are so real, you hold us close. Your peace, Jesus, is stronger than the storms of this world and the storms of our hearts.

Please come to every anxious soul, every hard challenge, every frightening experience. Keep watch over us until the night is over and the storms have passed, and your morning comes again. In your strong name we pray. Amen.

Now may the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift his countenance upon you, and grant you peace. Amen.