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A Fearful Faith

Why are you so afraid? Has anyone ever asked you that before? Last summer I took some of our youth to Six Flags. Now I enjoy riding roller coasters, but at the ripe old age of 26, my body is starting to disagree with getting beat around on those things. I love to go upside down, but I am seriously afraid of dangerously high drops. So when the kids asked me to get on a roller coaster with a monster drop, I was a bit leery. Why was I so afraid? Well for starters, I much preferred the tilt-a-whirl. What if it falls off the tracks? What if I throw up? What if my belt comes un-buckled? A lap bar just doesn't make me feel safe. I wasn't short on excuses.

We all have things that we fear. We fear small and seemingly insignificant things like mice and spiders and we fear major, life changing things like economic stability. We fear failure and the unknown. We fear a lack of control and a life not fully lived. We fear death, we fear loss, we fear the future. And we fear the storms in our lives, those moments where chaos and turmoil and helplessness overwhelm us. These moments remind us that life is unpredictable, that in the grand scheme of things we have little, if any, control over our lives and this world.

In the face of the storms we experience, in the rush and chaos of our daily lives, we seek the calm. We frantically search for those moments where we can just sit down and relax, live without worrying, have a glass of wine, go for a light run, or watch an afternoon of Lifetime movies. Sometimes we like to have nothing to do. We need quiet in our lives in order to maintain our sanity.

Yet sometimes we may find ourselves fearing the calm, those moments where storms are at bay and nothing dramatic seems to be happening in our lives. For me, the worst part of that roller coaster was not being upside down as we sped through the loops, but those seemingly endless minutes where we were climbing this gigantic hill and then were hinged at the top, waiting to be let loose. You hold your breath, you look around or maybe you close your eyes, and just wait for the coaster to drop or for the storm to unleash its fury. While we appreciate the calm places, aren't we always waiting for the next thing to happen? We have a hard time trusting that things will be smooth for very long. If our lives are quiet, certainly something is right around the corner ready to strike and throw our lives off balance. We fear the calm because the calm is pregnant with possibilities.

As I read and studied our gospel reading for today, I had this persistent image of the disciples in my mind. After the storm has finished raging, thanks to the work of

Jesus, our text states that the disciples were “terrified.” They are afraid *after* the storm, afraid when things have become calm. Maybe it’s sort of like how I was shaking when I stepped off the roller coaster. I imagine that they were looking at one another, dumb-founded, jaws on the ground and eyes wide: “What the heck just happened?”

Now some translations of this passage say that the disciples were “terrified” and others that they were in “awe.” I believe that the disciples experience two fears – amazement and terror. Clearly this is something to marvel at – Jesus just stopped a storm in its tracks, he saved their lives by simply speaking a couple of words. How can they possibly comprehend what just happened? But at the same time they are scared because clearly this guy they’ve been hanging out with has some serious power. There is something they have not quite come to understand about this Jesus.

In this calm, quiet moment the disciples are faced with the reality of the call they have taken up to follow Jesus. They are hinged at the top of that hill, about to take off. As they look at one another and then at Jesus and take in the waters that show no evidence of recently threatening their lives, Jesus interrupts their silence – “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” Are the disciples afraid of the Good News, of Jesus?

In both the storms and calm seas of our lives, we are in the presence of God. Like the disciples, we may not always be aware of it and we may not believe it at all. But this passage illuminates God’s presence in all places and moments. I think the disciples were both terrified and in awe because they came face to face with God – the power, the glory, the mercy, and the love of their Creator. And that is certainly something that we can be overwhelmed by, comforted by, and intrigued by. The disciples come face to face with God, getting a glimpse of just how powerful and merciful God is in the same moment. But I think there is something else happening here as well.

“Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

The disciples were certainly terrified of the storm and terrified by the power of God over nature which they have just witnessed. But back to my earlier question: Are the disciples afraid of the Good News? Are they afraid of Jesus? I think the answer is a resounding yes. The disciples realize that there is a lot more to following Jesus than they thought. Think about how much they’ve already given up – their livelihoods, their families, and any sense of control over their future. They are probably ridiculed by some for following this Teacher and envied by others who want to be as close to him as they are. Outwardly, they have made some sacrifices and changes, but there are further implications of following Jesus and having faith. They will be changed from the inside, out.

So are they afraid of the Good News? Yes! It is demanding a lot from them, including sacrifices and unimaginable trust. Of course they’re afraid of the Good News – they are witnessing things and hearing things that no one else has and that many others are not able to understand. The Good News is making them uncomfortable. Jesus’ love

and mercy and power is challenging them. They are experiencing God in ways that no one else ever will – and there are implications.

When we come face to face with God, we are never the same. When we get the job we desperately needed, when we recover from a near-death experience, when a loved one passes away peacefully, when any of our prayers are answered – we are changed. And we fear the implications, we fear what we must say or do now that we have experienced God. These experiences prove how strong or weak our faith is. We cannot ignore these experiences, just as the disciples simply could not disregard the fact that they tasted death.

We cannot ignore our faith; it's not something we believe in and never use. It's not something that serves our needs without us engaging it. Our faith challenges us. Our faith has implications. That can be scary, it can cause us to be fearful, because we don't know where our faith will lead us. We don't know what God will ask of us, how God will stretch us, or what God will show us.

Do me a favor. Close your eyes and put yourselves on the boat with Jesus and the disciples. You are sailing across the Sea of Galilee, enjoying quiet time together. Suddenly you see a storm roaring up the sea towards you; you frantically help the others empty the boat of water, but it's useless. You turn and see Jesus, fast asleep. He looks comfortable and peaceful; you know he's exhausted but for the love of God we are in the middle of a storm and we're about to die! You shake him furiously, screaming that he must wake up and do something. He stands up and simply says: "Quiet. Be still" with an air of authority which you've never witnessed. And that's it. It's all over. You look at the disciples standing next to you, each of you absolutely stunned. What does your face look like? Is your heart racing? Are you speechless or are a hundred questions rolling off your tongue? (*allow a few moments of silence*) You can open your eyes.

Now what? I imagine that's one of the questions the disciples were asking themselves as they pondered who this Jesus was who controlled nature. The disciples had to do something; there were implications for their witnessing of this event. And we know what those implications were – to faithfully follow Christ, even unto his death on a cross, and to continue teaching and bearing witness to God's truth and love. I'm certain that they were afraid even after that day on the Sea of Galilee. But what they did with that fear is what matters. The terror and awe that they experienced in the presence of God compelled them to carry on the faith which has been handed down to us. (*slowly*) The disciples are afraid of the Good News because it demands their lives.

So what will we do with the Good News? What will we do when we catch glimpses of God, when we come face to face with God, when we become aware of God's presence with us? This passage, this experience of the disciples, calls our attention to God's ceaseless presence and eternal love. Each day we experience God and we are called to pay attention. Jesus had the disciples' full attention, he was holding onto their seat as they teetered at the top of the hill ready to drop hundreds of feet. When he asks them

why they were afraid and whether or not they had faith, I think what he was really asking was: “Are you ready to follow me, like *really* follow me.”

It's okay to be afraid of the Good News, to be afraid of God. It only makes sense because our human minds will never comprehend it all. And so it's okay to be afraid of being a Christian because it requires our entire lives, every ounce of our being. It requires make sacrifices. It requires us to be willing to speak up when others won't. It challenges us to be still, to listen, and to discern. It leads us to be different from others, to go against cultural norms and societal expectations. It is downright scary to have faith! To trust something that we can't see and to hope in something that we don't fully understand. But we have a faithful and trustworthy God who understands our fears and encourages us to keep moving forward, to keep loving and living according to the Good News, no matter where it takes us or what it requires of us or what it reveals to us.

I love this quote: “I pray that the presence of Christ will be so alive and awake in our spirits that truth will not only be spoken but heard and carried out into the world...so that something like love may be done.” The disciples were afraid in the calm moments on that suddenly still sea as they witnessed God in action, but their fear led them to share God's Word. And we are called to do the same. Stop and take notice of God's movement, of God's presence. Embrace your fears, pursue the unknown that accompanies faith in our mysterious, triune God. Rest and listen in those quiet places. Pay attention to God, look for God, listen for God. While it's uncertain where our faith will lead us, we have a trustworthy passenger asleep in the stern ready to act in the midst of the stormy seas and calmest waves. Amen.