



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Be Not Afraid!”

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The Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 4: 35-41

“Lord, we try to disguise the truth about ourselves, but you see who we really are - a broken, frightened, struggling people. You know our hearts, our fears, and our weaknesses. Send us courage, we pray, for we are nothing without You.” Amen.

Some of my favorite childhood memories come from my experiences at church camps in the summer. Going off with my friends from church for a week of crafts, campfires, singing, Bible study, s'mores, and spiders in the bathrooms. Maybe time is playing with my memory but I remember so many spiders in the showers and bathrooms that all the girls would put off going in there until absolutely, direly necessary. Our arachnophobia was that serious.

Now I am an adult and I find that the fears of my life are also more adult.

There was a list of almost 600 phobias on the internet, which are very real to the people who suffer from them - phobias of all sorts of bugs and animals, types of people, body parts, too much space and not enough space, virtually anything you can think of. Here are a few examples

Isolophobia - Fear of being alone

Bibliophobia - Fear of books

Coulo'rophobia - Fear of Clowns

Me'lophobia - Fear of Music

Homilophobia - Fear of Sermons

We just heard a very dramatic story read by John: a large lake, a fierce storm, a nearly swamped boat, and twelve frightened disciples. Jesus, meanwhile, was sleeping through it all. When the disciples woke him up crying, “Don't you care that we're drowning?!” Jesus simply said, “Peace. Be still.” And the storm stopped. Jesus was shocked that they had been so afraid, betraying their lack of faith.

These twelve men had spent a lot of time with Jesus. They had listened to his preaching, his prayers, his parables, watched him heal and cure and work miracles. And now, a storm comes up and they think that Jesus won't protect them in danger? That he doesn't care?

A few weeks ago, our friend, choir member and Elder, Gary Stahl, emailed the choir about a storm experience he had had some 30 years ago. He wrote: “I have a few comments about the anthem we'll

be singing on June 21, “They That Go Down to the Sea in Ships.” As many of you know, I graduated from the Naval Academy in 1979. While I was actually commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, I did some time at sea. In November 1980 I was at sea aboard the USS Okinawa in the middle of a terrible storm. We were severely buffeted three days and two nights. I can identify with the words of Psalm 107. Even in our rather large and well-manned ship we did indeed ‘reel to and fro’ and after a while you do feel at your wit’s end. The final stanza captures very well the sense of relief and serenity when the storm finally is past and the port is in sight.”

This story of Jesus and the storm points out two important things:

One, that God is the God of wind and rain, sea and land, stress and calm, and commands the storms to rise and fall.

Two, that we human beings are reluctant to put our lives in God’s hands. We would rather live in fear than risk living a life of faith.

Hymn: Give to the Wind Thy Fears (286) v, 1,2

Did you know that the words “Fear not” appear in Scripture 62 times?

(Genesis) That very night the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you.

(Deuteronomy) See, the Lord, your God has given the land to you; go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you; fear not, nor be dismayed.

(Isaiah) Fear not, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

(Daniel) “Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard.

(and the familiar words in Luke) The angel said to them, “Fear not, for I bring you glad tidings of great joy for all the people: unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Jesus says to his friends, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” But even though God tells us to “fear not,” our hearts are heavy with anxiety about the Recession, retirement accounts, wars and rumors of wars around the world, that a pink slip is just around the corner, about family members who can’t get along. The disciples were in the very presence of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, but they could panic just like the rest of us.

When the Angel says to the Shepherds, “fear not,” when Jesus asks his disciples, “why are you afraid?” when Paul instructs the Phillipians, “Don’t be anxious about anything,” they are all saying the same thing: God is with us. Jesus is right here beside us in this boat, even when it feels like it’s filling with water. A bad report from the doctor, a son fighting a drug addiction, a painful divorce, the death of a spouse, teenage depression and suicide attempts – who hasn’t raised her hands to the heavens and cried, “O God, where are you?”

I heard a story on NPR last week as I was driving home at the end of a long day. It was a story of faith versus fear that caught my attention. Maybe you heard it, too. Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish is a Harvard-educated, Palestinian doctor who works in both Israeli and Gaza hospitals. He is well-known and respected by the Israelis. But last year the Israeli army sent tanks into Gaza in an offensive strike which killed 900 civilians, including three of Dr. Abuelaish’s daughters. But instead of calling for revenge, instead

of continuing a program of fear, Dr Abuelaish is preaching reconciliation. With the money Israel gave him in compensation for the death of his daughters, he is starting a foundation that will give support and scholarships to needy Palestinian women and girls to honor his three dead daughters. "Military ways are futile, for both sides," he said. "Words are stronger than bullets. We need to understand each other."

God Moves in a Mysterious Way

I'm sure many of you know the story of Michael Weisser, who at the time of this frightening incident was a cantor at a synagogue in Lincoln, Nebraska. He and his family had just moved into a new house in Lincoln, when they received the first of many ugly, harassing phone calls from Larry Trapp. Mr. Trapp was the Grand Dragon of the KKK of Nebraska, wheelchair-bound and nearly blind. After the barrage of hateful phone calls began, he started sending the Weissers anti-Semitic pamphlets in the mail, doing everything he could to instill fear in them. Eventually the cantor tracked down Mr. Trapp's phone number and started leaving messages on his answering machine, but these were a different sort of message: they were offers of rides to the grocery store and dinner invitations. One night, Trapp called the Weisser's house and said: "I want to get out of what I'm doing and I don't know how." Mr and Mrs. Weisser drove to Trapp's apartment that night and talked for hours and a close friendship formed. Eventually, Trapp moved into the Weisser's home as his health worsened and they became his caregivers; he renounced the Klan, apologized to those he had threatened, and converted to Judaism in Mr. Weisser's synagogue. He died in their home a year later.

The church is often described as a boat. In fact, the word NAVE, which we call our sanctuary, is Latin for boat, and you can see that our ceiling has a design like a keel, the bottom of a ship. Sometimes we sail on calm waters, like these Baptismal waters, peaceful, promising unity and tolerance; but more often than not it feels like we are sailing through a storm. Life is full of chaos; God isn't responsible for any of it, but He tells us over and over again that He is in the boat with us, giving us strength. "Be not afraid!" says God the Lord. "Don't be discouraged. I will be there to help you wherever you go."

We've heard the words of Frederick Buechner quoted a lot from this pulpit, and I'm going quote him again.

"A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. The grace of God means something like this: 'Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.' There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can only be yours if you'll reach out and take it."

And so, my dear friends, we must not be afraid, but choose to reach out and believe that God is here to give us the courage only He can give in the storm.

+ "Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith." By Frederick Buechner