

sermon-6/21/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Riding Out Life’s Storms”  
Mark 4:35-41  
By Jim Patten

As some of you who have served as an elder or deacon know, I love to show movies as part of our annual session/deacon retreat. Usually the movies are on the lighter side. Still they manage to lend themselves to interesting discussions about faith issues. This year I chose to show something a bit darker. We watched the movie “Fearless.” It is about a plane crash and its aftermath.

One of the survivors was a man played by Jeff Bridges. He had formerly been deathly afraid of air travel. Having gone through a horrendous crash, he ends up finding an amazing peace in the midst of it all. It leaves him in a state of fearlessness.

At first this seems like quite a blessing. To experience peace when all around him people were deathly afraid felt like a miracle. It certainly was a spiritual experience of sorts. He brought calm to all he interacted with before and after the crash. He was able to lead some of the survivors to safety.

I won’t go into all that happens when he returns home, but the result of this man becoming fearless was not a good thing. He ended up losing a part of what makes us all human, part of his humanity as it were. His relationship with his wife was almost destroyed. She had not experienced what he experienced and he could not let her in on his own feelings. He ends up doing crazy, death defying things because he felt invulnerable.

I don’t know if this was the point of the movie, but I ended up thinking part of what makes us human is our fear. It is our vulnerability that makes community possible. Fear is not necessarily a bad thing.

How does this connect to what the Bible says? Don’t we hear over and over again in the gospels, “Fear not.” From the angels at Jesus’ birth speaking to the shepherds out in the fields, to the angel speaking to the frightened women at the empty tomb, to Jesus speaking to his disciples on several occasions, we hear the refrain, “Fear not.”

Is the Bible telling us we should not be afraid? When we experience threatening things like a crash, a serious illness, financial disaster, or the like, is the Bible telling us we should just suck it up and not be afraid? Is one a coward if they are afraid? Is one less a Christian if they are afraid?

I don’t think that is what the Bible, or Jesus, are asking of us. The trick is to not deny our fears, but to not let those fears control our behavior. It is natural and human to be afraid. It is when we respond to life and others out of our fears where unfortunate things happen. That is not an easy trick to do. It takes great spiritual discipline to recognize our fears, yet not be controlled by them. It also takes a deep trust in God.

That is what our scriptural passage in Mark is trying to illustrate. This is a passage about fear. The disciples, and Jesus, are in a boat on the sea, at night. A huge storm comes up and they are being swamped by the waves. They are perishing. Anyone who has ever been in a little boat in a storm knows just how terrifying that can be.

This is not, however, just a story about fear at sea during a storm. We know there is great symbolism going on here. Early Christians often referred to the Church as a boat. Thus, the disciples on this storm-tossed boat are a microcosm of the Church. The sea was seen as representing chaos, representing all those destructive forces beyond our control.

When the scriptures have Jesus walking on the sea or rebuking the sea, as he does in this story, they are affirming that Jesus cannot be overwhelmed by the waters of chaos. He walks above it rather than drowning in it. He rebukes chaos just as he rebukes demons and tells them to be quiet. In our story Jesus' trust in God is so great he can sleep in the midst of chaos.

In contrast, the disciples are fearful and they respond out of that fear. They let their fear affect their relationship with Jesus. They ask him a terrible question: "Do you not care that we are perishing?" How can you sleep when we are in such dire straits?

That is a constant refrain in the Bible. We read over and over again in the Psalms the authors feeling like God is asleep and not caring. Fear leads to questioning God's goodness and care. Fear in our story led the disciples to question God's goodness in Christ.

Present day Christians can certainly relate to this. Each of us has most likely experienced times in our lives when we felt like God was sleeping, like God did not give a rip about our pain, our desperate situation. In those times, our fear most likely did not serve us well. It might have led us to lashing out at each other and God.

This is not to put a guilt trip on anyone. It is human to feel a sense of abandonment in the midst of chaos or crises. Certain experiences can reduce us to little children crying for protection. But, people of faith don't stop there.

Jesus, in our story, asks the disciples, "Have you no faith?" which is the same as asking, Do you not trust me? One commentator says Jesus did not say there is nothing to be afraid of. That would be ridiculous and extremely unrealistic. Jesus did ask the disciples to not be afraid, to not let fear control their behavior. Those are two very different things.

What is amazing is that when Jesus calmed the storm, saving their lives, the disciples became even more afraid. Notice he asks them after he rebukes the sea, "Why are you afraid?" He did not ask them, "Why **were** you afraid?" They are afraid after the crisis is over.

Scholars tell us the NRSV translation of vs. 41 is not a good one. It reads, “And they were filled with great awe. . .” A better translation would be, “And they were fearing a great fear. . .” The King James has it “And they feared exceedingly. . .” These disciples were terrified, more terrified than they were of the storm. Why?

It is apparent they are terrified of Jesus. Who is this that can calm a storm at sea? What would it mean to follow this one? What would need to change in my approach to life if I trust this one, if I give my best loyalties to him?

I think we can begin to understand this. We may not like being fearful. We may hate feeling like we are drowning in chaos. But, the known is at least better than the unknown. Radical trust, and the changes that brings, is not easy. But, as one commentator remarks, the question put to the disciples long ago remains before us, will we “exercise faith or fear” when life gets tough?

Many of you know about my good friend Doug. We traveled with him and his family this summer on vacation to Lake Tahoe. At the end of our trip he had surgery for a blocked artery in his neck to prevent his having a stroke. Ironically and tragically, he had a stroke anyway 45 minutes after the surgery. He is only 53 years old and in great shape. He woke up unable to talk, unable to use his good hand, with blind spots in both of his eyes.

Fortunately he is improving daily. He can now talk without slurring his words most of the time. I received a call from him last week. He wanted to thank us for being with his family during that first 12 hours after the surgery.

I asked him what was it like to wake up and not be able to talk or use his hand? Was he terrified? He said he was not. He said he felt an incredible peace. Doug is an ordained minister and psychologist. His mentor in counseling developed ALS many years ago and died a couple of years ago. Doug would go each Saturday and bathe and dress him to give his wife a break. It required getting up at 5:00 a.m. and driving for an hour to his home. He watched this man go through the devastation ALS brings on all those who go through that disease. Doug said watching his mentor handle the increasing limitations with grace and good humor helped him when he was experiencing some of the same limitations.

Doug’s words touched me profoundly. They reminded me that fear and despair need not have the final word in our lives. When we can trust in the midst of all that threatens to overcome us, our lives will be different. We will encourage others as they witness our behavior. It is contagious.

Another commentator said we are not promised a peaceful journey as we make our way through life. But, we are promised a peace-filled journey if we can trust the one worthy of our trust in the midst of life’s storms. The next time we experience chaos, the next time we experience a storm, large or small, let us pledge ourselves to be honest about our fears, but then to exercise trust, not fear. Amen

