

Sermon: Mark 4:35-41
June 20, 2021
CCM
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May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

One of the earliest and most vivid memories I have comes from the summer when I was three years old. We were living in Westfield, New Jersey at the time, and every summer we would go “down the shore” as New Jerseyites like to say, to Stone Harbor.

On arrival that summer, my parents had given me a gift. Opening the package, I discovered a blue bucket, a yellow shovel, and a beautiful red tugboat. I was thrilled, and every morning I would collect these items from their place on the front porch and proudly carry them to the beach, where I would put them to good use creating castles and moats and imagine myself on fantastic voyages sailing the seven seas. I loved these gifts!

Then there came the day when I was down by the water’s edge, sailing my tugboat to some enchanted land, when all of a sudden, a rogue wave came crashing in, tearing the tugboat from my hands. It was gone. After the wave receded, my Mother and I desperately searched up and down the beach, but to no avail. The tugboat, my pride and joy and already the source of so many hopes and dreams, was gone.

I know. This seems pretty trivial at this point. But it was my first real experience with irretrievable loss, and the fear that accompanies such loss, and clearly I have never forgotten.

You see, my childhood fears have not ended. They have just changed. And I’m going to guess that I am not alone. In, I’m going to guess this morning that we all carry fears with us on a daily basis.

We fear the death of loved ones. We fear the loss of our health, employment, success, security, and reputation. We fear failure and what others will think of us when we fail. We fear being out of control. We fear being powerless. We fear the unknown, what might happen and what might not happen. And the list goes on. I am sure that you could add to that list. If so, what would you put on it? What do you fear this Sunday morning?

Actually, as I look around our world today, I’ve come to believe that fear has become one of the primary drivers and controllers in our lives. I don’t think it matters which side of the any given issue we find ourselves. We are all afraid.

And here's the problem. Fear can take hold of us. It can terribly distort our lives. It can determine the choices we make, the words that we say, the actions that we take, the thoughts that we have, the ways we interact with each other, and even the prayers that we offer. Indeed, fear can ultimately destroy us.

You know, there are so many challenges before us in this first quarter of the twenty-first century. It seems to me that, if we are going to successfully address any of them, the very first thing we must do is find the grace and strength to overcome our fear.

And Jesus said, 'Peace! Be still! And he said to them, "Why are you afraid?"

If truth be known, we often just want to escape the storms in our lives, do a geographic, and avoid our fears altogether. We want to be picked up and set down somewhere else, safe, calm, and comfortable.

But that is not how God and the Gospel work. I sometimes wish that it were. But it's not.

In this morning's passage from Mark, Jesus and his disciples are on their way, to continue the mission. And here, in his example, Jesus offers us the first clue as to how to drive the fear from our lives. It is to trust in God even to the point of resting peacefully in the midst of turmoil. Lest we ever forget, Jesus understood fear. Yes, he was and is fully divine. But he was also fully human. Remember the Last Supper. Remember the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember Good Friday. Jesus understood fear and he knew that the best remedy was to take the time to rest easily in the presence of the One who had sent him in the first place. Fear often makes things seem so urgent and causes us to panic. When we feel that happening, it is time to be still. It is time to rest in the presence of God. It is time to take the time to pray.

The second reality found in this passage is that there will always be storms, both without and within. Jesus has not come to rid the world of storms. Instead, he has come to be with us right in the middle of them. We might find ourselves in the midst of chaos, with the seas raging and the winds howling. And Jesus will be there. Now, in these moments, we might not recognize him. All we see are ghosts. But I promise you: He is there. He is Emmanuel, "God with us." When we can really believe this, when we can see him standing with us in the midst of all our fears, then the winds die down and the seas will subside.

You know, a variation of this story of the stilling of the storm is found in all three of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Do you remember the additional touch that Matthew includes? It is about Peter. Peter so desperately wants to prove himself, to prove that he is worthy of Christ's love. And so he asks Jesus if he can join him walking on the water. And out of love, Jesus says, "Come." This reminds us of what Jesus has said to us before: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest."

“Come,” says Jesus. Of course, we know the rest of the story. As soon as Peter focuses again on the strong winds, and not on Jesus’ invitation, he begins to sink like the “rock” that he is! But Jesus immediately reaches out and catches him. That, my friends, is the heart of the Gospel in one brief verse. We do not have to fear anything, not even our failures, because our Lord is always there to catch us when we sink, when we stumble, when we fall.

“Peace, be still! Do not be afraid.” The Good News this morning is that no matter how strong the gale or how high the seas, we really have nothing to fear. Sure, we’ll keep watching the news and click on social media and worry about a future that seems so uncertain. But even now, Jesus comes to us, stilling the winds and calming the seas. He is with us now because God is love. That is why we are gathered together here this Sunday morning, to worship Emmanuel, because he is God’s son. And when, over the course of the coming week, our friends and neighbors ask us, “Aren’t you afraid?” we can respond in faith, “No. Because love casts out all fear.”

Amen.