

August 13, 2017

“*Why Are You Afraid?*”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 4:35-41

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My parents are visiting from Indiana this weekend, and on Friday we took the Island Queen Ferry over to Martha's Vineyard. It was a beautiful day, and there were a lot of sailboats out sailing the waters, and it brought back memories of when John and I first met in Connecticut, and he had a beautiful twenty-seven foot Catalina sailboat. We had a lot of fun on that boat and I have many great memories of sailing on Long Island Sound. But one sailing memory in particular stands out vividly in my mind. We went on vacation to the British Virgin Islands. And one beautiful, bright blue sunny day, thinking we were adequately proficient and prudent sailors, we thought it would be fun to rent a sailboat and sail in and around the islands of the Sir Francis Drake Channel. The only boat available was a thirty-eight foot Pearson. "What's another eleven feet," we thought. Well, let me tell you, it's a lot more boat with a lot more beam and a lot more displacement, and as a result it really tested our seamanship, as you'll soon find out. Anyway, we rented this boat in Tortola and had a great day of sailing. We were somewhere southwest of Norman Island when we spotted some very threatening storm clouds coming in from the east. So we decided it best to head back to port as quickly as possible. John dropped the sails, secured everything down, and began motoring back. But as quick as we were, the storm was quicker. And before we knew it, the wind and waves picked up, and we found ourselves in the middle of a very heavy and nasty squall that literally turned the daylight into night. And suddenly not being able to see any land magnified the level of our anxiety. In order to keep the boat under control, we headed into the wind straight up the middle of the channel, at least that's what we hoped. Remember, this was well before the advent of GPS, so we were navigating with just some basic paper charts and dead reckoning. John told me to go below and I remember looking up from the hatchway and seeing him at the wheel trying to control heading and speed to best handle the waves. Each time the bow of the boat slapped into a big wave, it sent back a wall of water some thirty plus feet that drenched him as he was gripping onto the wheel for dear life and keeping course. And like those disciples in today's Scripture lesson, I can honestly say, we were afraid. Here we were caught in a storm in an area that was new to us, unfamiliar with the waters, or our exact position, on a rental boat that wasn't ours, depending on a motor of unknown reliability to keep us going. The squall lasted no more than thirty minutes, but, trust me, it seemed like an eternity. Yes, we prayed, and all I could think of was that famous song by Gordon Lightfoot, *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*. Some of the lyrics go like this... “the wind in the wires made a tattle-tale sound as the waves broke over the railing... at 7 p.m. the main hatchway caved in... the

cook said, fellas, it's been good t'know ya... the captain wired in he had water comin' in, and the good ship and crew was in peril... and later that night when it's lights went outta sight, came the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." And there is one particular line that kept repeating itself in my mind, "Does anyone know where the love of God goes, when the waves turn the minutes to hours?" Yes, it seemed like hours. But it wasn't, and before we knew it, our prayers were answered, and we were back in beautiful sunlight and calm seas.

As I reflect back on that incident, I can see now that there were actually two storms raging that day. Obviously, the first was that outward storm... the terrible squall, the raging wind and rain and waves. But, there was also an inward storm... the fear that was building inside us, and that could have overcome us, if we'd let it. And I know for certain at this point in my life, with many life experiences under my belt, that inward storm of fear, by and large, can be worse than anything the physical world can do to us. Because fear truly is our worst enemy. Fear and anxiety can distract us from our daily routine and can literally take the joy out of living. Fear saps our energy and distorts our perception of reality. Fear makes us vulnerable. But I also know, at this point in my life, that there is a remedy for fear. That it does not have to have a place in our life. This summer we're looking at some of the questions God and Jesus, asked people. And today's question is the one we heard in Scripture, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith? Why are you afraid?"

Now the fact is, all of us will have storms that come into our lives no matter where we stand in our relationship with God. Jesus said, "God sends the rain that falls on the just and the unjust." So there will be storms that hit our family life, our jobs, our health, our relationships. And we can react to these storms in one of two ways. One way is to let that fear, that worry, that anxiety, overwhelm us and control us. And I think we've all been there, haven't we? Trying not to think about our situation, but finding our thoughts wandering, conjuring up all sorts of "what ifs." What if this happens? What if this doesn't happen? And we play out all kinds of scenarios in our mind. We let fear and worry eat away at us until it consumes us, and then we often find ourselves bitter and resentful, we lament our circumstances, and begin to blame others, and more often than not, we blame God. And like the disciples we cry out, "Hey, Lord, don't you see we're struggling here and we're about to go under. Are you asleep or what? Don't you care?" O, we of little faith!

The other way we can react to the storms in our life is by having faith. Faith in the One who truly has the power to calm our fears. The One who said, "Peace. Be still." The One who said, "Yes, you will have troubles in this world, but I have overcome the world." The One who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." The One who said, "I am with you always." The one who said, "Why are you afraid?"

Here's some Bible trivia for you. Do you know what the most frequent command is in the Bible? Well, I'll tell you. It's "Fear not. Do not be afraid." In fact, there are three hundred and sixty-six references to "fear not" in the bible – one for every day of the year, including leap year! Do you think maybe God is trying to tell us something? "Fear not." Fear not. You know, if you really think about it, the term, "fear not" is actually God's loving invitation to live with peace, with confidence, and with hope, even in the midst of the storms that may come our way. "Why are you afraid?" Just listen to more of his promises..."Do not be frightened or dismayed for I will never leave you or forsake you. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God. And you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear. I know the plans I have for you – plans for good and not harm. My steadfast love endures forever. My peace I give you."

You see, the real miracle of today's story is that Jesus is there in the storms of your life to say to you, "Peace. Be still." And yes, like the disciples, it may sometimes seem to us that Jesus is off to the side, sleeping, not caring. But this scripture proves that's not true. Jesus was there and did care. "Why are you afraid?" You see, when Jesus asks us that question, "Why are you afraid," he is really asking, "Don't you trust me?" Don't you have faith in me? You see, the depth of our faith is really a measure of our trust. Do you trust in a God that is all powerful? Do you trust that God really does love you? Do you trust that God will keep his promises? Then, indeed, why are you afraid? Now granted, faith and trust do not always come easy. In fact, Sarah Young, author of the best selling book, *Jesus Calling* writes, "Trials (can be) God's way of exercising our trust muscles." When we are faced with the storms that will inevitably come, it is an opportunity for us to say, "Okay, Lord, I will not be afraid. I will trust you." And then we pray, and we repeat those promises to ourselves, and we give our fears and worries over to Christ, who will work in our lives, even when it seems like all is lost. Even when it seems that cancer has the last word. Even when it seems the relationship will never be reconciled. Even when it seems your children or grandchildren are lost. Even when it seems the bills will never be paid. Even

when it seems that the shame or mistakes of the past are too big to overcome. Even when it seems like you will sink under the heavy pressures of your situation. Because when we trust in the promises and power of Christ, we will find that "peace that passes understanding," we will find a joy in knowing we are loved and cared for by God, and we will find a hope that looks to the future.

I want to end with an interesting story Tony Campolo wrote about a former world chess champion, Bobby Fischer, that speaks to what I'm saying. Fischer and a friend went to see the classic Ingmar Bergman film, *The Seventh Seal*. The plot of this film revolves around a medieval knight who engages in a live game of chess with the devil and death. Throughout the film, you can see a chess board come out at various time as these two make moves on each other to see who's winning or losing - the good knight or the evil one. As the movie comes to a climax, the Prince of Darkness makes his move, and with great finality, utters the word, "Checkmate!" With that, the movie is over. But Fisher, the chess master, turned to his friend, and in a puzzled tone, exclaimed, "Why is the knight giving up? His king has one more move! The king has one magnificent move left that could turn the tide and win the game." So to you who are caught in a storm, and all is dark, and you don't know what to do – trust that your King has one more magnificent move left.¹

So, why are you afraid? Remember his words, "Peace. Be still." (Pause) "Peace. Be still." Amen.

¹ Stories That Feed Your Soul, Tony Campolo