

“Why are you afraid?” “Why do you doubt?”

Isaiah 43:1-7

Matthew 8:23-27; 14:22-33

“And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’”(8:26) “But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’”(14:27) “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’”(14:31)

“Dear God,” prayed a Breton fisherman, “be good to me; the sea is so wide and my boat is so small.” Twice in Matthew’s Gospel, the scene is a storm on the Sea of Galilee with twelve fearful disciples adrift in a small fishing boat. Here the similarities end. In the first story, the disciples have followed Jesus into the boat. In the second story, Jesus has made them get into the boat without him. In the first, *the storm* terrifies them and they wake Jesus saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” In response, Jesus questions them: “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” In the second, *Jesus* terrifies them. They cry out in fear saying, “It is a ghost.” In response, Jesus assures them: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

In these two stories we also have to do with two very different sorts of fear. The first sort of fear actually surfaces before the disciples follow Jesus into the boat. A scribe approaches him and declares that he wants to follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus cautions the man, warning that he will no longer be at rest in the world. Then another says he will follow Jesus, but only after he first has buried his father. As far as we can tell, neither of these two men follow Jesus.

The disciples do. Going after Jesus into the boat, they begin to row. For a moment, we are allowed to think these twelve are the fearless ones. Then suddenly a violent storm blows up with waves so great that the boat is swamped. The disciples believe themselves to be perishing, and I am here to tell you from personal experience, their fears are well founded! Wakened from sleep to save them, Jesus instead questions them: “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?”

Seen from one angle, the fear of the scribe and the grieving son and the would-be sailors

are all one fear, the fear of some external circumstance whose power is experienced as a threat to human existence. In the case of the men who turn back, that circumstance is discipleship. In the case of the disciples, having taken the first step into the boat with Jesus, a storm reveals them to be men who still live as though death has dominion and as though death's attendant chaos has the power to shake their trust in the one who has power over the wind and the sea and death itself.

In relation to this first sort of fear, you and I likely live somewhere along the continuum of turning back and crying out in terror. Still on the shore, God only knows who or what has caused you, or will yet cause you, to consider losing your life to find it. [Let me hasten to say that we are not talking about walking away from your present life in order to follow your bliss. The distinction between discipleship and desire having been lost in this culture, remember that we are talking about following Jesus.] Suffice it to say at the crossroads and on those nights when our very souls are required of us, sometimes our fears get the best of us. On the one hand, you want to open yourself to God's hand on your life taking you where you might not want to go. But then you think, you pray on the other hand, "Oh my God, the things that could go wrong!" In fact, even if you are not facing "life at the crossroads" but only the high anxiety of entering a room full of strangers, no doubt the mind's incredible ability to imagine catastrophe has caused many of us to walk away from the destiny that was ours for the daring.

Why are you afraid? In the little matters, in the day to day anxiety provoking choices, I think we might say to Jesus that we do not know why we are afraid. We simply choose to deal with the demons we know. Terra firma. We would rather bury the dead because the dead can no longer surprise us. Though just under the surface of our playing it safe is the little bigger fear of failing. Or as Karl Barth put it, "Fear is the anticipation of a supposedly certain defeat." So we

do not even give it a try or we make a list of what sounds to us, for all the world, like reasonable excuses or we postpone the decision with the fiction that this is not a good time in our lives. “Choose this day,” Jesus says. We choose to stay put.

But once on the sea, then there are other fearful circumstances that have less to do with choice and more to do with chance. Why are you afraid? Maybe it is that you have no control over the factors that have caused you to leave or be left by one place or position or person and you find yourself with only the freedom to choose your response: dread or great expectation? Maybe it is instead the case that you, like the disciples, have freely stepped into a boat that then is overtaken by some chaos with the power to take you down. This is often when we use the word “fate” to name what has befallen us. According to Glenn Tinder, fate is something that “comes upon us from without, often strange and uninvited, always at enmity with personal being,...irresistible, and inescapable.” Be it metaphorical waves crashing over our little boat or the invasion of our body by illness and disease, fear grips us. And even if it should happen that our life is not ultimately threatened, the person we thought we blithely were becoming is. Endangered, exposed, helpless, defenseless: this is why we are afraid!

You would think, in these circumstances, Jesus would be our personal pastoral care giver. Especially when, on the continuum of human fear, you are on the verge of perishing rather than asking like a reasonable person if you can “take a rain check”; especially in extremis you expect a little godly sympathy. Apparently this is not a realistic expectation. In the first story, Jesus is sleeping through our high anxiety; in the second story, he has sent us into the storm and high seas without him. When, in the first story, he wakes to the disciples’ petitions for help, he calmly responds with a question whose answer is obvious to those of us living in the clutches of death, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Is he kidding?

But notice that he asks this of the disciples. He asks those who have taken the first step, who are in the ship of faith, so to speak, who have left their former lives for life with him on the high seas. These are the characters who seemed to trust him completely as long as the seas were calm and the sky was blue. That Jesus was as good as asleep posed no problem until the external circumstances caused the disciples to react with fear, as though death had dominion and Jesus were as good as dead and they were without help or hope in the world.

Time and time again in Matthew's Gospel, the disciples are said, by Jesus, to be people of little faith. He says this of us who have no need of him and who even forget he is in the boat with us until the storm blows up and fear overtakes us. When fear is our response to the things of this world that would keep us from the life we have been given by God to lead, then our little faith is evident! Therefore Jesus speaks first as our critic before he acts as our savior. To the first fear, the fear that keeps us from taking the first step or the same fear writ large that keeps us, in life and in death, from putting our whole trust in God, he simply asks us to think about it before he calms the wind and the waves of our lives with a word.

The second fear, as Karl Barth is famous for saying, is the only worthwhile fear. In the second story, Jesus has put the disciples in the boat without him. Evening falls, the storm comes up, the waves batter the little boat, the wind is against them and they are blown farther and farther away from him who is their help. Yet nothing is said about their fear, only that they are in this state until early morning when Jesus comes walking toward them on the sea. Here Matthew is not interested in hearing about our enlightened take on what is scientifically possible, by the way; he is speaking theologically. The boat is the early church, after the resurrection, when Jesus' followers are weathering rough storms—persecution and conflict and death—without his earthly presence. In the midst of a multitude of external circumstances threatening them, we read

that they are terrified *not by these things* but by what appears to be the ghost of Jesus coming toward them. I will let Barth take over from here:

It is a fact that when we are really afraid, we do not have to fear this or that thing, but God. Mere fear of life—deep and strong thought it may be—is like the fear of a child in the night. It has no meaning, for it is not caused by awe but only by agitation. Such fear drives us from one anxiety and disturbance to the other; but it cannot totally capture us....The other fear, the great fear of being responsible for our short life, the fear of the eternal God, of His nearness and of the judgment in which we stand—this fear is not caused by the night, but is caused [by God's coming near to us]....It is only here—with all due respect to our fear of life—that it is really worthwhile to be afraid.

As Jesus walked toward them, “The disciples cried out in fear. But immediately,” Matthew tells us, “immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’” When the fear that overtakes us issues from awe and not agitation, then it is the God who has come close in Jesus Christ who is our only comfort. Then the assurance of his word spoken from the pulpit or in a hospital room or across the table or on the edge of an open grave is all we have and it is enough for your storm-tossed life and mine to go on. “Having reached the ultimate limit of all that we fear, where God is revealed to us, we are no longer afraid of this is the next thing, but of [God] alone.”

Finally Matthew addresses the doubt that still dogs those who have weathered the storm, assured of God's presence. In that assurance, Peter alone takes the next step. Once again, his walk on the water has less to do with the paranormal and more to do with the ongoing power of the first sort of fear to overtake us, especially when we really mean to do something brave. “Come,” Jesus says, but you know how it goes. We dare the next step and suddenly the wind comes up. Before we know it, we are sinking fast. That old fear returns sending us back to where we started. Except we are not, because having followed him this far, Jesus' hand immediately catches Peter, catches us and keeps us from falling too far from his grace. I imagine Jesus smiling and shaking his head as he says to Peter, “Why did you doubt?”

Then there is one last little detail easily missed, especially given our little faith. The real miracle for Matthew and the early church and those of us still in the boat is this: the doubt that caused Peter to sink and Jesus to catch him becomes the occasion for the whole community to confess, “Truly you are the Son of God.” Thanks be to God. Amen.