

Covenant Word

Calling on the Lord

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

the money will not last to the next payday much less through retirement. In face of these things, whistling a tune or listing our favorite things hardly feels sufficient. Fear raises questions in our souls like: *Do we believe that at the darkest and most exhausting places in our lives, there will be strength and peace enough to see us through?* (Joanna Adams, "Faith and Fear," Journal for Preachers, Pentecost, 1996)

Congregation: **Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**

Let's look to today's texts for two examples.

The summer started with Abraham and Sarah. They give birth to Isaac. Isaac marries Rebekah, who gives birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. Jacob, after stealing his inheritance from his brother, marries Leah and also her sister, beloved Rachel. Leah gives birth to many sons, but Rachel to only two: Joseph and Benjamin. And Jacob loves these two better than all the rest because their mother was Rachel. Joseph, in particular, is set apart as the favorite when his father has a special coat made for him. Not only does it have sleeves, but it is a technicolored dream coat!

You see, Joseph is prone to dreaming. He dreams of how his

brothers will bow down to him as his status becomes even more elevated. These dreams do nothing, however, to create esteem for Joseph in the eyes of his older brothers who are out in the fields taking care of the flocks as he, Joseph, is sent to be a spy on the older boys' work by their father. Their sibling rivalry reaches its peak, when the brothers see Joseph approaching their field. They quickly devise a plan to grab him, remove his coat, and throw him into a cistern. The original thought is that they will kill him, but they decide it will be better if they sell him as a slave to some traveling Midianites who are en route to Egypt.

We know that this story will eventually have a lovely ending, but at this point, without the rest of the story, the text places us in that pit right beside Joseph. Stripped of his favored status, his future uncertain, his relationships in shambles, shamed for pursuing the mystical meanings of his dreams, his father absent and his God not even mentioned, I wonder what it was like for Joseph in that deep, dark, dank cistern. What is it like for any of us in the dark, exhausting places of our lives? *Do we believe*

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
August 13, 2017*

Throughout the sermon, the congregation will be asked the following question and are expected to respond. *"Do we believe that at the darkest and most exhausting places in our lives, there will be strength and peace enough to see us through?"* (Joanna Adams, "Faith and Fear," Journal for Preachers, Pentecost, 1996) Congregation: **"Everyone who call on the name of the Lord will be saved."**

I have started and stopped this sermon too many times to count. What does it say to a faith community when their "proclaimer of good news" stands before them to admit that she is often consumed with anxiety, troubled by doubt and sometimes debilitated by fear? It doesn't take much these days for fear, specifically, to reach out and take hold of me. If Lloyd is late, I wonder if an accident has occurred. If I don't hear from David, I search the news for some crazed terrorist gone rampant in New York City. If Dan goes radio silent – which is not hard for him to do – I fear he has some latent germ from his trip to India that has suddenly come to life to consume him. Because my fear is often irrational and out of control, I find that there are days when I simply cannot absorb the nightly news. Our world has become an unpredictable place of sophisticated fear. Daily events seem to feed its appetite.

We have good reason to be afraid, and our fears are many: fear of death; fear of life; fear of the outsider; fear of the alien; fear of anyone who is different for whatever reason; fear of cancer; fear of crime; fear prompted by the fall's upcoming elections; fear of North Korea's missiles; fear of white supremacists and states of emergency as seen in Virginia this weekend; fear of failure; fear of new school starts, different teachers and different students; fear we will lose our job, fear that we will remain stuck in jobs. Fear that she will not say "yes." Fear that he will say "no." Fear that

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**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



Baptist Church of the
Covenant
Where Faith Comes to Life

2117 University Boulevard
Birmingham, AL 35233-3188

205-328-0644
FAX 205-328-6060

Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

God is with us or do we wonder if there will be strength and peace enough to see us through?

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And then there are the disciples: saddened, perhaps frightened by the news of John the Baptist's death and how it will affect their own future. They are worn out from a day's worth of intense ministry with the masses, and then Jesus insists that they leave him. He takes charge of dismissing the crowds and cleaning up. He is hopeful that rowing and fishing and resting on the opposite shore will be just the thing to restore the spirits of these experienced fishermen. They had, after all, spent most of their lives on the sea and sometimes when we are weary with fear, to revisit what is familiar brings us comfort.

Jesus chooses to stay behind. Praying is what will bolster his spirit, and so while Jesus is praying, the disciples get caught in a storm. The wind whips up. The waves are large enough to beat against the boat. With the wind against them, all their misunderstanding of the sea as chaotic and the home of demons rises up to haunt them. It is these underlying primitive thoughts that have them thinking that Jesus is a ghost. For after all, how many times have we seen a man or woman walk on water? (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Saved by Doubt," *The Seeds of Heaven*)

I remember preaching this text in Cuba, exaggerating the wind and the waves. Being fishermen, they know how small a boat can be when tossed about on a big, deep sea. Being Christian, they know how small they must play their lives in the face of an oppressive government. They knew the story well enough that translation was at a minimum, for who among us has not been terrified when the axis of our world tilts, and our direction is unsure? With the wind against us, it takes enormous amounts of energy to just stay afloat and not lose ground. *At those dark and exhausting places, do we believe that there is strength and peace enough to see us through?*

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Only Matthew's gospel mentions Peter. Peter is the disciple who seems to always take a risk. He rushes into things and speaks what the others think but would never dare say. He makes great leaps of faith, and stumbles so often that we find him spending inordinate amounts of time brushing himself off so that he can get up to try, try again. (Taylor) Peter's great big heart is constantly on his sleeve. He speaks openly about his love for and devotion to

Jesus, but then he denies knowing Jesus totally. He is full of faith one minute and full of doubt the next. He richly deserves Jesus' judgment, but just like you and me, he only receives Jesus' love and grace.

For who among us has not been terrified when the axis of our world tilts, and our direction is unsure?

So in the midst of the storm, wanting to disprove the ghost theory and prove the Jesus theory, Peter asks permission to walk

out to Jesus. Instinctively, before we read another word, we know what will happen next. We know because we too have stepped out full of courage to speak about convictions of our heart. But with each negative reaction, it becomes easier to submit to fear and silence our voice.

Or maybe we have struck out bravely to follow a new course with our lives only to find that we lose our confidence with the first signs of a storm and so we sink back down into the dark patterns that feel, oh, so familiar.

Or maybe we take a few hesitant steps towards a noble goal. Meeting success, we, now over-confident, take a few miss-steps and before we know it, we are up to our necks in water. We feel like Houdini, with our hands and feet bound, locked in a trunk, with no key, no air, no freedom, no tomorrow. It is there, at these points that we sink. But also like Peter, when we cry out, "Lord, save us!" the hands of love reach out faithfully to bring us to safety. (Joanna Adams)

So, what if this story read differently? What if Peter did not sink? (Taylor) What if he had jumped out of the boat with perfect confidence, landed splat with both feet flat on the water, smiled across the waves at Jesus and glided toward him without a moment's hesitation? And what if the other disciples followed suit? We can imagine them piling out of

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the boat after Peter, and all of them, with perfect faith, romp on the waves with the storm raging, the wind beating against the sails, and lightning splitting the dark night above their heads. This would be a really different story if that were how it had happened. It would be a story full of super heroes. It would be a story about those who

can walk on water and change the lives of others eternally for the good without a bit of help. But without a bit of help, would there be any need for Jesus? Without a bit of help, would there be any need for a Savior?

So, thankfully, Peter sinks being the ordinary disciple that he is. All at the same time, he is full of faith and doubt, courage and fear, confidence and insecurity, and so he sinks when he attempts to walk on the water, which in actuality is a great assurance to us.

For **when Peter sinks**, I know I can forgive myself for the times I stepped out with bravado only to tread water.

When Peter sinks, I can understand that my doubts are not mutually exclusive from my faith.

When Peter sinks, I realize that faith is not the absence of fear, rather faith is the courage to walk through the fear.

When Peter sinks, I am no longer ashamed to give voice to my fear of the chaos by praying with confidence, "Lord, save me!"

When Peter sinks, I have the confidence to follow Jesus who offers His hand, who lends His courage, and who possesses the hope that we will use the Kingdom resources available to us to change lives eternally for the good.

I want to step out on faith that we can do remarkable things with the resources we possess to alleviate fear and bring about the salvation of people we meet right here on this corner of God's Kingdom as well as around the world.

Ooooh, when Peter sinks, I know the answer to the question: *Do we believe at our darkest and most exhausting place, that there is strength and peace enough to see us through?*

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I cannot speak for you, so I will speak for myself. I know I want to walk on water even with its dangers and battles of faith vs. doubt. I want to step out on faith that we can do remarkable things with the resources we possess to alleviate fear and bring about the salvation of people we meet right here on this corner of God's Kingdom as well as around the world. I know these things because:

Jesus tells us there is nothing to fear.

Jesus saves us from the chaotic waters by being present with us.

And Jesus responds when we cry for help every single time.

Perhaps, like Peter, you fear you are sinking. If that is the case, call on the Lord to save you and He will. And not only will he save you, he will bring you to this boat, where it will be our privilege to grab you by the scruff of your neck, haul you in and love you in this place of shelter that holds secure against any storm. All we have to do is ask for his help. So do you believe that *at our darkest and most exhausting place, there is strength and peace enough to see us through?*

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Then respond to the gospel, as we stand and sing "Precious Lord," #834.