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A Sermon Preached by
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DELRAY BEACH

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Overcoming Fear

Mark 4:35-41

Will You Pray With Me?

Heavenly Father, in a world that struggles to find its balance amid war, poverty, illness and financial difficulty, steady us with the certainty of Your Holy Word. Grant us such confidence in Your presence and concern for us that those things that would frighten us may be diminished. Lift our vision to see Your glory in the midst of our daily lives. We ask these things in the strong Name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

That wonderful preacher, Bryant Kirkland once said, “It is fair to say that Jesus went to the cross with fear, but not anxiety.”¹ Dr. Kirkland sought to make clear the difference between fear and anxiety. He states that fear is that disturbing emotion that organically affects our bodies and our outward behavior. It is the result of actual or anticipated danger or pain. Fear is a part of the human condition and to deny that Jesus experienced fear is to deny a piece of His humanity.

On the other hand, anxiety may be understood as how we deal with our fear. Do we allow our fears to become vague and, as a result, become

oversized? Do we approach fear with hopelessness? If so, our fears become destructive. More importantly, anxiety is an indication that we have lost trust in anyone or anything that may come along to help us. Dr. Kirkland is correct; it is fair to say that Jesus went to the cross with fear, but not anxiety. Over and over again Jesus surrendered Himself to God in prayer and in that was His peace.

Notice in our lesson this morning from Mark’s Gospel that Jesus never says, “There is nothing to be afraid of.” That would be ridiculous. The storm in the story was indeed fearsome as are the “wind and waves” that threaten us. Rather, Jesus asks, “Why are you frightened? Don’t you have faith yet?” Jesus is not saying that everything is going to turn out OK, though in this story it does. That is not what Jesus means by “faith.” What Jesus is asking His disciples about is the quality of their relationship with God. Do they not yet have that relationship with God that gives peace in the face of fear?

This past weekend millions

watched the Super Bowl. And down to the last four seconds, millions were praying for a Raven victory. But hear this; millions were also praying for a forty-niners victory. They could not both win though there was a mother at the game that wished exactly for that! Faith is not about one outcome or another. Faith is about trust in a relationship regardless of the outcome. Jesus took His fears to God in prayer and in the quality of that relationship with the Father, found peace rather than anxiety. Jesus overcame fear by surrendering Himself to God over and over again, trusting that God would be present.

Faith is about trust in a relationship, regardless of the outcome.

There is one area of life where many of us understand this; marriage. During a wedding ceremony, the bride and groom make promises to one another. The promises usually go something like this: “I promise to be there for you, in health and in sickness, in riches and in poverty, in joy and in sorrow.” Notice, no one makes a promise for the material or physical outcome of those being married. There may be health or sickness, prosperity or struggle, joy or sorrow. The promise made is in the quality of the relationship; one will be there for the other, regardless. The faith Jesus speaks of here is the quality of the

relationship between the disciples and God.

Let’s return to our story this morning in Mark’s Gospel. Notice how the story unfolds. The disciples become afraid of the storm that is swirling around them. Fear become anxiety and they turn to Jesus and ask, “Don’t You care?” Can you imagine turning to Jesus and asking that question? I can. I have. Yet, the question speaks to the quality of the relationship with Jesus and to God. “Don’t You care?” The question suggests that there is relationship work to be done.

Jesus stands up and gives orders to the wind and to the lake, “Silence! Be still!” One Bible scholar says that this is a far too tame translation of what Jesus spoke. “Muzzle yourself!” is a more accurate translation.² With the authority of the spoken word, the wind settled and there was a great calm. That is when Jesus asks them the faith question, the relationship question, “Don’t you have faith yet?”

It seems to me that Jesus calming the storm was less about the need for the storm to stop before something terrible happens. The development of the story suggests that Jesus provided a demonstration for the disciples of the power in Whom they are asked to place their trust. Jesus wants the disciples to have confidence that no

matter how fierce the storms are that we face, no matter how many crises crash upon us in our journey we call life, nothing has greater power than God. The great miracle of this story is not the calming of the wind and sea. The great miracle is that a relationship with God has the capacity to calm us in the midst of a storm. As my friend Howard Edington once said, “God may not calm every storm but God will calm us in every storm.” As we continually develop our relationship with God and become more conscious of God’s continued presence with us, there seems to be less and less reason to be afraid of anything in life.

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Ernest J. Lewis once shared this story. A young minister in Australia made a call on one of his older members. As he went into the room, he noticed a chair was pulled up by the bedside. He said to the man lying on the bed, “I see I’m not your first visitor today.” The man answered weakly, “I’d like to explain that. When I was a little boy, I had difficulty praying to Jesus; so my minister suggested that when I sat down to talk to Him, I pull up another chair. Then I’d talk to Him

just as if He were sitting right there.”

The young minister left after reading the Shepherd’s Psalm, the Twenty-third Psalm. A few days later, early in the morning, there was a knock at the pastor’s door. An anxious daughter sobbed out her story. She told him how her father had died without her being present. “I went out of the bedroom only for a few minutes to rest. I was only gone for just a little while. When I returned he was gone. He died alone and I am so sorry for that. There was no change in him from when I left the room except for one thing. His hand was on the chair.”³

Friends, the Christian affirmation is that we were made for fellowship with God. When we understand that, we also understand God’s desire that we surrender every fear, every worry, and every concern to Him in prayer. It is then that we place our hand in the chair, confident that God is there. It is how Jesus overcame fear and He invites us to the same. Amen.

¹Byrant M. Kirkland, “Look Fear in the Eye,” *A Pattern for Faith* (The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, 1983), 159.

²William C. Placher, *Mark: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010), 76.

³Ernest J. Lewis, “A Walk Through the Valley,” *Best Sermons, Volume X: 1966-1968 Protestant Edition*, edited by G. Paul Butler (New York: Trident Press, 1968), 173.