

“Trust”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 14: 22-33

What causes us to be afraid? When we are children, just being alone in our rooms in the dark can cause fear. Whether we are young or old, when we are in an unfamiliar place, uncertain noises can cause us to be uneasy. When we are travelling to a place we’ve never visited, riding in a taxi or a bus or attempting to drive on unfamiliar roads can cause fear. When we experience a health crisis, we can become very afraid of what the next week, the next day, even what the next hour might bring.

Whether we are a child with nightmares of what’s in the darkness, or an adult who fears what lies in our future, fear can be a powerful emotion to overcome. Many times, fear is an initial reaction to something startling, even if it proves to be a happy or exciting event. This is because fear arises when we are shocked, when we are shaken from our routine, when we are made aware of our mortality and how fleeting life can be.

What causes us to lose trust? When someone we put our faith in betrays our trust. When an organization acts contrary to its stated mission or beliefs. When a leader manipulates others for his or her self-serving purposes. Whenever we lose trust or faith in someone or something, we are less-likely to trust again in the same way again. What’s the phrase? “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

We see both fear and trust take center stage with the disciples in today’s gospel story, and how it is Jesus who must calm their fears before they can trust the miracle occurring right before their eyes. Consider first, though, what has happened previous to this story in Matthew. As we talked about last Sunday, Jesus has fed the multitudes, healed their sick, preached and shared the gospel to all who would hear. This came on the heels of learning that John the Baptist had been executed, but Jesus had not had time to mourn. Now, after all that, he sends his disciples away from him, out in the boat by themselves, while he dismissed the crowds and prayed alone on a mountainside. He finally had his chance to be alone and seek God’s comfort and peace, for it had been a very long day. Once he finished praying, he went to join his friends in the boat (14:22-24).

But by then we learn that the boat was far away from shore, and the seas were being stirred by the wind. The disciples were undoubtedly afraid for their lives, and perhaps felt as if Jesus had left them alone in this turmoil to fend for themselves. That does not

happen. In the darkness, a figure appeared, hovering and walking toward them over the waters. Jesus had not left them to be on their own; he was not going to abandon them.

Yet their first reaction is not joy but fear. "It is a ghost!" they cried out in fear and trembling (14:26). Peter Gomes writes, "Miracles are terrifying things: I think we imagine that if we saw a miracle we would all fall down on our knees and say 'Praise the Lord' or 'Hallelujah!' or 'That'll show 'em!' Those who do see miracles, however, especially those nearest to Jesus, who see them in the Bible, are usually confused, or terrified, or both, and that is the case here . . . when the disciples saw him walking on the sea" (Quoted in "Pulpit Resource," July - September 1999, p.25). To see the power of God in Jesus Christ is a terrifying thing, for it makes you realize how amazing he truly is.

And yet Jesus does not want to scare them, does not want to worry them. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (14:27). Throughout the gospels, we hear this: when the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream; when the angel spoke to Mary; when the angels appeared to the shepherds in the fields; when Mary Magdalene is greeted by the angels at the tomb on Easter morning — in all these cases and more, God says: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you." When God is present, we have nothing to fear, even if fear is our first reaction. God is patient, God is kind, God is close by and does not abandon us through Jesus Christ. It is this Jesus who came to his disciples in the night to show them who he is, and they responded in faith: "Truly you are the Son of God" (14:33).

Then there is the example of Peter. We often focus on Peter's lack of faith since he did not make it all the way out to his Lord on the water. But let's face it, Peter's lack of faith did not begin while he was walking on the water. It started from the very moment he opened his mouth and said, "Lord, if it is you . . ." From the very beginning, Peter did not trust that the figure coming toward him could be Jesus.

And then, Peter does something which in all honesty appears to be a bit arrogant. Instead of just waiting for Jesus to get to the boat like all the other disciples, Peter tests Jesus; in fact, he dares him: "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (14:28). And you know, in saying that, Peter is speaking for most of us as well. "Is there anyone among us who has never asked God for an exemption? Please, God, suspend the rules just this once and make me know that you are there. Heal me, help me, talk to me out loud. Leave me no room to doubt you and I will believe" (Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels, Cowley Publications, © 1997: 121).

Why do we need a visible sign? Why do we need something physical or extraordinary to prove to us that God is real? What compels us to audaciously ask God to perform miracles for our sake, or to work a miracle through us, so that we might have the proof beyond all doubt that Jesus is real and present among us? Is it the materialistic world in

which we live, where greater importance is placed on wealth and belongings than on human beings? Is it our being overwhelmed in the stormy seas of life, where random shootings and natural disasters shake us in fear and trembling? What causes us to test God the way we do?

Jesus must have thought the same when Peter tested him out on the Sea of Galilee. Instead of telling him to keep his butt in the boat because he would be there in a minute, Jesus tells him to come on out. Peter didn't need to be told to sit down and wait. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "What Peter needed was a couple of steps on the water (to cure his doubt) and then a nose full of sea water (to cure his pomposity)" (Taylor 121). And when Jesus scolds him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" it was not for his doubt while out on the water. It was because he doubted who Jesus was in the first place. When we fail to trust that God is at work, and demand a sign for God to show himself, where is our faith rooted: in what we see and know, or in what God sees and knows?

It can be very easy to lose sight of our faith in the midst of the small and large tumults of life. Our personal lives can feel like the raging seas, as we deal with family unrest, health crises, employment stresses, and uncertainty over our future. Our collective lives can feel like hurricane-stoked waters, as we witness war in Israel and Gaza, Ebola spreading throughout western Africa, immigrant children seeking safety at our southern border, and ethnic strife in countless points around the globe. Our natural reaction to such anxiety and uncertainty is fear, and we yearn to retreat to safety. Our natural reaction is to become skeptical about trusting another, even trusting God, and it is at those moments our faith can truly be tested.

And yet, perhaps Peter is our reminder once again about what is required to trust God as disciples of Jesus Christ. William Willimon writes: "If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing around in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture" ("How Will You Know If It's Jesus," August 7, 2005, www.day1.org).

I witnessed how stepping out of the boat, taking a risk, and trusting in God eventually bears fruit. This past week, we hosted the Wayne Township English as a Second Language Program. They had their registration night on Tuesday. This is our first year hosting them, and they will be meeting regularly on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. At their other locations, they average around 12-14 people, so they had a similar expectation for here on Tuesday.

Well, instead of 12-14 people showing up, they had 40 people show up, and they had to turn another 20 people away, because they had reached their maximum for the class. Over 60 people from our community showed up, seeking to learn English more proficiently, so that they might be more active and productive members of our community.

One of the teachers made the comment that we must have a very active outreach program in this community, for us to have that kind of response. Indeed, when people pass by this building, they trust that what happens here will be for their benefit. They trust that they will be treated with respect and dignity and will be welcomed for who they are. And their trust in us would not have been formed had we not trusted in God to step out in faith, take risks of connecting with our community, and serving daily as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the midst of the storms of life, don't be afraid to trust: in yourself, in one another, in the one walking toward you on the water. And, if there are times you need to step out of the boat in faith, it's okay to do so. Because sometimes, it's in those moments of risk-taking that we come face-to-face with the one who we can always and forever trust will be there to save us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.