

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

A couple of weeks ago, I was out walking our dog, Ethel. Yes, our dog’s name is Ethel – seems even more appropriate now that she’s 16 years old! Anyway, we were about two blocks away from our house, on our way home. To my left, I saw a small car coming to a stop, preparing to turn left onto the street we were walking down. There was a cable truck parked on the street, so this car was having to turn left in front of this truck, which made it a blind turn, in essence. I wouldn’t have thought much of it, except I then saw another car coming towards us, and frankly it was going much too fast.

As the small car edged out and began its blind turn around the truck, my natural instincts kicked-in and I raised my hands – while holding Ethel’s leash – and yelled. Now, you’ll be happy to know I didn’t say anything that would have embarrassed you, you know, with me being your pastor and all! I think it was something to the effect of, “Slow down!” or “No!” Thankfully, the oncoming car saw the other car turning and stopped quickly, so there was no disaster on Fordham Street as I had feared.

I kept walking back home with Ethel, when about a minute later, I heard someone shouting from behind me. At first, I didn’t think about it, but then, after a second time, I turned around, and saw this tall, young man jogging toward me. I saw the speeding car stopped and parked on the street, and I realized this was the driver that I had yelled at. My heart sank. The fight-or-flight reflexes started to activate in my brain, and I wasn’t sure what to do. Was he coming to confront me? How long would it take for me to get back inside my house? I was kicking myself for yelling at the car earlier, and I was paralyzed by fear.

Before I could act on my fight-or-flight reflex, the man came up to me - and apologized for driving so fast. He saw my reaction, which prompted him to slow down and see the other car. He and his wife had just moved into the neighborhood, and he was embarrassed for seeming reckless. It totally caught me off guard. I thanked him for stopping and speaking to me, and I welcomed him to the neighborhood. What had started off as a moment of fear ended as an encounter with grace.

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. 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 thing 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 a massive explosion in Beirut, Lebanon, continued calls for racial justice in our country, loss of property and lives from tropical storms and wildfires, and the never-ending anxiety of the coronavirus pandemic. 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).

There was one thing I didn’t tell you about the encounter I had two weeks ago with the young man in my neighborhood. He was black. I did not know that when he was driving fast on the street – the windows were tinted, and I could not see the driver. But as he was approaching me on the sidewalk, I will not deny that his race influenced how I was feeling. In light of all the turmoil our country has been living through this summer, I was fearful of how this encounter would end.

His act of humility and reconciliation broke through my fear, and it helped me see him not as a threat but as a fellow human being. It was a risk he took to come forward and engage with me. It was a holy encounter that allowed faith to overcome fear.

I never got his name or found out where he lives in our neighborhood. But now I am wondering: what would it look like to take a risk and continue a conversation? What would it look like for me to reintroduce myself, the next time I see him, and share our stories with one another? I hope that I have the courage to take that risk – for it’s the kind of risk we all need to be taking in this tumultuous time.

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.