

WHY ARE YOU AFRAID?

Great Questions (Part 3)

Text: Matthew 8:23-27

The Seismos Megas

When we meet in our Scripture lesson for today, he has been conducting a ministry of teaching and healing along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. His work has been attracting an expanding crowd of would-be disciples who seem to think that following him will be a good self-help strategy or another one of those fine causes to which they can be partially-committed. But Jesus has in mind a much deeper kind of devotion and that greater life that flows from it. Chasing away a couple of these superficial followers, Jesus gathers the twelve disciples who'd been with him the longest and gives them orders to cross with him to the other side of the lake. Matthew 8:23 says: "**Then [Jesus] got into the boat and his disciples followed him.**" The implication is that the boat heads out into deep water when, "**without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat.**"

It's helpful to remember that most of the men who were out with Jesus in that boat that day were seasoned watermen. As fishermen by trade, they had ridden-out plenty of storms. The one that that came upon them that day, however, was something rare. The English translation says it was a "furious storm," but the original Greek calls it "seismos megas." Think "mega-seismic." In other words, it wasn't just a bad gale. It was a veritable aqua-quake, the kind of mega-monster of a typhoon that turns the bowels of even the most seasoned sailor to mush. A perfect storm.

You can see Peter and the rest of them, can't you? They're wide-eyed and white-knuckling the gunwhales, as mountainous waves surge above them on every side and come crashing down on top of them, threatening to smash the little boat into matchsticks at any moment. You can hear them shouting: "Get that sail down, John! Bail faster, James, God-blast it! Turn the bow, Peter, that one's going to hit us! Jesus, Jesus," they cry, as they whip their heads around to where their Master had been sitting. "**But,**" the Bible says, "**Jesus was sleeping.**"

When Our Life Is a Storm

It feels that way sometimes, doesn't it? One minute, life is calm and the sun is shining. The boat of our life is cruising along peacefully. Maybe there's a little chop, a bit of turbulence, but nothing we can't handle. The sea-spray and rocking of life's normal challenges are familiar to us. But then, "**without warning,**" the wind starts to really whip up, till we know that what we're facing is no ordinary gale. The late night phone call comes and it's from the hospital. The unexpected knock comes at the door and it's the police. The discovery is made that it's not a cold, it's cancer; it's not an emotional

drift, it's an affair; it's not one drink too many, it's an addiction; it's not a heavy truck going by, it's an earthquake; it's not a momentary economic downturn, it's long-term unemployment or bankruptcy. It's not one of those little tests or tribulations, it's a *seismos megas!* And, like the disciples in that boat, we can barely hear our voices screaming against the wind or the dark of the night.

We cry out to God in these moments, but there is no answer. We've been taught that God cares. We've trusted – maybe not all the time but most of the time – that there is Someone out there who is concerned for our welfare. We've followed him this far in life – again, not perfectly, but with some measure of perseverance. Yet now, in our moment of terrified need, where is he? He's sleeping. He is apparently utterly insensible to our condition, leaving us to drift, to despair, or to die, while he's off someplace in his dreams. And so, we shout louder, hoping against hope that somehow we might rouse him.

This is something of what those original disciples were experiencing in that moment. In the gospel-writer Mark's telling of this same story, we're told that **"Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion"** (Mark 4:38) – and we now know a little more about this image. Back in 1986, northern Israel endured a terrible drought that dropped the water-level of the Sea of Galilee to a point not known for nearly 2,000 years. It exposed the raised prow of an old fishing boat which had been amazingly well-preserved in the surrounding mud. Carbon-dating definitely placed it as from the first-century A.D. What is even more fascinating is what they found in the stern of the boat. It appears that, back then, fishermen would fill a bag full of sand which would serve as a form of moveable ballast for the boat. It was exactly the kind of item that someone could curl up next to and use as a pillow.

As remarkable as that discovery was, it isn't half as amazing as what happened next in the original story. In the midst of the storm, the Bible says, **"The disciples went and woke [Jesus], saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"** Mark's gospel supplies a different nuance to their statement that feels even closer to the sentiment most of us have in the midst of life's worst storms: **"Teacher,"** they cried, **"Don't you care if we drown?"** And in that characteristically maddening mode that is pure Jesus, the Lord answered with a question of his own. **[Jesus] replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"**

When Fear Is a Gift

There is something in most of us that wants to counter: "Why, Lord, would you even ask a question like that?" On the one hand, the question of Jesus here sounds like a *crazy inquiry*, utterly out of touch with reality. "Are you kidding us, Jesus? Hello! This is a seismos megas, Jesus! What is it about dying a cold, gurgling death out here in the dark that you think seems OK?" Or else the question of Jesus can be read as a *harsh reprimand*. He seems to be scolding his disciples, doesn't he? "Where's your

faith, guys? Are you such wimps that you're actually scared? Man-up here! Have a little more confidence in me, will you."

But I don't think that the question of Jesus here is either irrational or irritated. I think it is, in fact, simply another one of those GREAT QUESTIONS that rise through the mud of time, like the prow of that ancient fishing boat, to seize our attention and to prompt us to dig further. Fear, you see, is a fascinating emotion and, oftentimes, a wonderful gift. It can be life's warning light, calling us to slow down or pull over. It can be life's alarm clock, waking us to a danger that we'd be wise to avoid, if possible. Fear can be life's neon arrow, challenging us to pay attention to a relationship that needs tending or make a hard right turn that leads to a better road. Even being afraid for our life – being shaken into recognizing that we are mortal creatures who depend upon God not only for our origin but for our continuation and our ultimate salvation – is a profound gift.

So here's a radical thought. Maybe Jesus puts his head down on the cushion sometimes and appears to sleep through our terrified cries because he wants us to be afraid. The Psalmist says that **"the fear of the Lord"** – and one might add "of the consequences of action or inaction in the face of his call and commandments to us" – **"is the beginning of wisdom"** (Psa 111:10) and the changed behavior that flows from it. If you are afraid of some storm in your life right now, maybe God is warning you to drop the sails and stop trying to move so fast. Perhaps that fear is an alarm calling you to grab the oars and really row hard instead of passively waiting for somebody else to rescue you. Maybe he's calling you turn the bow of your boat toward Him or the people around you.

Understanding Our Fear

When Jesus asks: **"Why are you so afraid?"** he is offering us a helpful gift in another way too. If we sit with that question, it can help us get clearer about what really drives us in life. Sometimes the apparent source of our panic is only the surface storm of a much deeper struggle about which we need to get honest. I remember a moment many years ago when our church was in terrible conflict, congregational giving had plunged precipitously, and people were leaving the church in droves – or at least I feared they were. Night after night I tossed and turned in my bed, unable to sleep. I remember crying out to God: "Lord, you've got to do something about this or at least show me what to do!" "Why are you so afraid?" God seemed to ask me.

"Are you crazy?" I wanted to shout back. "This church is going to crack in two and go straight to Davy Jones Locker. I will have inherited this wonderful church and then presided over its sinking at sea." "No, I don't think so," God said. "I think they'll just fire you before that happens and then things will settle down." And I my jaw dropped, because I suddenly knew God was right. I had been telling myself that the reason for my fear was that the church might be ruined, but the truth was that I was afraid that I

might be ruined. I was scared that I might lose my job, that I might turn out to have been not quite mature enough to have handled this post, that I might be embarrassed.

So God says: "We're making progress here, Dan. Let's play that scenario out." So I did. "OK, so I lose this job. The church finds a better pastor. I go away and really think about the mistakes I've made. I learn from them and become a better pastor in my new church in Alaska." And then God says, "That's even more progress. But how about we try this, for the moment? Why don't you try being a humbler, more careful and prayerful pastor now, right here, and see what happens. You start dealing by faith with that selfish storm inside of you, and let's just see what I can do with the wind and those waves out there."

"Why are YOU so afraid?" asks Jesus. "Are you joking, Lord," you answer. Can't you see that this furious financial storm I'm going through means I might have to move out of this house and community?" "Yes," he says, "that will be hard. You'll have to live in different conditions, with less of what everyone says is necessary to look 'successful' or to be 'happy' by somebody's standard. But where did you get the idea that life as it is now is the only possible good? I remember when Sarah and Abraham said that and Joseph said that and all those fishermen worried so much about what would become of them if they left their familiar nets. Do you remember how that turned out?"

"Why are YOU so afraid?" asks God. "Lord, can't you see, my marriage, that friendship, that relationship with my kid, it's going under! Don't you care?" "I do," says God. What if it turns out that you're a major part of the problem? Maybe you need to face yourself as you really are. OK, I can see why that will be hard, especially at the start. But at least you'll be living in truth. At least you'll have some solid ground on which we can build together. I remember when David was afraid of being found out and Mary Magdalene and Peter were afraid of being found in their failures. Did I ever tell you what I did with them?"

"Why are YOU so afraid?" Maybe you answer: "Jesus, are you kidding?! My body is going down the tubes. That person I love is going under or gone." "OK, I understand that this is hard, one of the biggest challenges you'll ever face. But did I tell you that all of you are mortal or did you just forget that? It's alright, I understand that too. But listen: All of you left that little womb-room that was all you knew of life once before. You passed through that dark canal. It was terrifying. It was labor. And then you entered a larger life. That's what is going to happen again, only this time it will be my hands that deliver you into a world far brighter than anything you have ever known."

When Fear Is a Curse

The truth is that fear is not always a gift. Sometimes it can be a harrowing curse. Author, Yann Martel writes that sometimes, "fear has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy." There are times when fear absolutely takes over the

helm of our boat, disabling us amidst the storms of life. It is especially in those moments that we need to have faith in the One who took great pains to get into this boat with us. The Bible says that after asking his question, Jesus offered a dramatic sign to his disciples there – and to his followers in every generation. Jesus **“got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and”** as suddenly and without warning as it had gotten so stormy, **“it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’”**

Beloved, it is never because He does not hear that He appears to slumber silently when we are in the midst of our furious tempests. It is never because He does not care that he does not still the storms through which we pass. When God is silent or stays his hand, it is because He is wise. He knows when fear is needed to warn us, to wake us, or to reroute us. He knows when fear is required to turn us to Him. But the ultimate message of Jesus – and indeed all of the Bible -- is that if we stay in the boat with him, we never need fear that we will finally be lost. There will come a day when the storms subside and the sun shines bright. There will come a day when the work He seeks to do in us and through us is complete. There will come a day when this old boat comes to rest on the sand of eternal shores. Who is this, that even the winds and the waves obey him? He is Jesus, our Savior, our Lord.

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Great Questions (Part 3)

Text: Matthew 8:23-27

1. Describe a time when you were in the midst of one of life's "storms." What was that like? What were your thoughts and feelings about it?
2. There are various kinds of "seismos megas" in life. List some of the kinds of "furious storms" that can come upon people.
3. The message indicated that sometimes "fear can be a gift." How so? How can fear actually be helpful?
4. When is fear not a gift but a curse? What are some of the bad effects that fear can have?
5. A frequent message of the angels we meet in the Bible is "Do not be afraid." Take a look at some of these passages where this message is given and ask yourself, "What are we to have faith in in order to overcome destructive fear?"

Genesis 15:1

Genesis 26:24

Exodus 20:20

Deuteronomy 31:8

1 Samuel 12:20

Psalms 118:6

Isaiah 43:5

Matthew 1:20

Matthew 10:28

John 14:27

Revelation 1:17

Revelation 2:10

6. In relation to what issue or area of YOUR life right now are you feeling afraid? Is this fear...
 - a gift to be embraced and responded to?
 - a curse for which the power and love of God is needed?