

Message
August 6-7, 2011
1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33
Fear, Courage and Faith!

Today, if you will, let's rummage around with three words from Jesus: fear, courage and faith.

Academy Award winning film, "The King's Speech," as you know, is the story of King George VI, who ascends the throne with the threat of Nazi Germany on the horizon. Advised by his father, King George learns quickly that the monarchy in these critical modern times is best reached through radio broadcasting. King George, recoils in fear at the thought of such an effort. Public speaking will reveal his deepest dread. He suffers from a sever stammer, a stutter. The movie is a true story of fear, courage and faith as the Duke of York, now King George, struggles to overcome his speech impediment. What the movie does not include is King George's most moving speech made New Year's Day 1940 with the agony of war encroaching. With fear in the back of his throat, courage on his heart and faith in his soul, the king broadcasts to the nation the following: "And I said to the one who stood at the gate of the year 'give me a light that I may tread safely into the Unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'" It seems that King George VI knew, what the disciples had yet to learn: that a life of fear is conquered through faith that results in great courage.

So, let's look at the story of the disciples in the boat for a bit. First, let me ask, what is your biggest fear? Ok, got it? Now, hold onto it, and let Jesus help you into the boat, and let Jesus triumph your fear. Following the feast of feeding the 5,000, Jesus, before retreating to pray, *makes* the disciples get into the boat to sail to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew's gospel is a fulfillment gospel. The writer writes of God's promise made known in the Old Testament, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God with us, among us. Readers and studiers of Matthew's gospel at the time it is written, those Christians known as the Church, suffer deep persecution for their faith. So, when we read at the beginning of today's story that *Jesus makes* his disciples get into the boat, we're learning of a Jesus who is on a mission and very concerned about his faithful community sailing some pretty rough waters as they learn and behold the fulfillment of Jesus' saving grace for them. We also learn, not in Matthew's gospel, but in John's gospel, that the end of the feeding of the 5,000, is fraught. The people are desperate to claim Jesus as Messiah, so they begin to surround him and take him by force. Always reaching out to care for the faithful, Jesus takes command, knowing that his followers have yet to gain the confident boldness of courageous action in his name. So, quickly, with urgency, Jesus escorts the disciples into their boat to sail to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

At its deepest point the Sea of Galilee is about 150 feet; not a body of water you would want to have to tread for long. At its widest point, the lake measures about eight miles. 1200 to 1500 foot high hills surround the Sea of Galilee. The northern end of the lake,

where the disciples pushed off, has very little protection. And, because it sits about 700 feet below sea level it's subject to sudden temperature shifts which result in high winds. Then the darkness of the night descends.

Maybe this is how it is for you. Life's dilemmas just seem to loom in the dark of the night. The darkness just folds us up into worry and anxiety, fear and dread. As the winds of uncertainty press in, and we become increasingly unsteady, we find ourselves in a threatening state long before the extraordinary happens. Then, because this is what Jesus does, he walks right into our worst storms, never fearful, and he just tromps right in to alleviate every anxiety, eliminate every fear, to just care for us. Now, my guess is that when we're traipsing around in the middle of a storm, and life is whirling all around...we might not fully recognize the miraculous power of Jesus' grace and love and mercy when it comes walking up to us. Sometimes, when it's time to pay attention to Jesus, really pay attention, we're not always ready to move on to relief mode once help arrives. Sometimes, it is that we've worked so hard at staying in the struggle we're actually disquieted by the rescue. This is what happens when Jesus comes to save.

The disciples are terrified. The word terrify actually translates as troubled, perplexed, disturbed. Well before the fear sets in, the disciples are troubled, perplexed, disturbed. Jesus knows the feeling. Before going to the cross, he's troubled at the supper table as he confesses the identity of his betrayer. He's perplexed and anguished as he foretells his impending death and subsequent resurrection. When he appears with the disciples after his resurrection, he's disturbed that they fail to recognize him. Now, the disciples, struggling in the boat, see the miracle of Jesus walking on the water, you'd think they would have it figured out. After all, Jesus has just taken five loaves and two fish, given thanks, broken them and distributed enough to the disciples who were able to feed 5,000 with twelve baskets left over. You'd think they wouldn't be surprised any time Jesus shows up to take care of us. Instead, they think they see a ghost. After all, a ghost walking on the water makes a whole lot more sense than the person of Jesus walking on the water. Maybe it is they're just trying to make sense of their terror which now has blown into full fledged fear.

The Greek word for fear is phobos. The ancient priest in the temple, Zechariah experiences the awe of phobos when he is confronted by the angel of the Lord to tell him the good news of the birth of his prophet son, John the Baptist. The shepherds in the wilderness are ready to flee in phobos when they are surrounded by a throng of angels hovering over them to tell the news of the birth of the Savior. The dread of phobos, brings property owner Ananias to his death when he realizes that he can't survive lying to God. Also, in many ways fear is a good thing. Fear is a warning that triggers us to take caution, to protect, to beware. Last year, I was driving with a colleague downtown on I95 and the traffic was horrible. The person in front of us over corrected and plummeted into the guardrail. The mack truck next to us screeched on his breaks and came within six inches of slamming into her. I swerved to the side, stomping on my breaks, but not before throwing my arm across my passenger to prepare her for the impact, which we thankfully avoided. Fear is our motivator for safety.

When we're fearful, what do we do? We fight back, swinging our arms in safety; maybe throwing our fists in the air; and we recoil, we withdraw, we shrink; and we get our words stacked up ready for a might attack. And, for some of us, fear is what makes us want to flee. In the first half of the 20th century, one Harvard professor, coined the term "fight or flight response". In other words, in order to adapt to our environment, in order to survive, we naturally fight or flee when threatened by fear. Fear, is the opposite of hope; the foreboding anxiousness that what's to come will not be well. We live in a world ridden with fear. We're fearful of the worldwide economic crisis; the wide spread war across the planet, our friends in Sudan, our Christ Church children in Korea, Afghanistan, and Iraq. We're fearful of other world powers and their ability to conquer our freedom. I imagine most of us live with personal fear: maybe we're not good enough, that others might not like us, that we won't succeed, that we won't be rich enough or healthy enough or prosperous enough; that we won't measure up.

One author sharply reminds us, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure... We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" She continues by adding, "Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God... We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone." Jesus, walking across the turbulence, reaches out to everyone of us and grasps our fears. "It's me," he commands, "don't be afraid,...have courage." Courage, is what Jesus gives us to persevere and withstand difficulty. Courage is best defined in story. In scripture, courage is so often how we identify Jesus. Jesus' courage is demonstrated in his healing. Earlier in Matthew's gospel (9:2), Jesus, stands up to the authorities as they accuse him of blasphemy; and he meets a gathering who bring a paralyzed friend for healing. Jesus first words in all the tension, "Take courage." Interrupting his mission, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years, (9:22) boldly reaches out to touch the hem of Jesus' robe. Courage doesn't always roar. Often it is the voice that says, keep trying. Honoring her courage, Jesus turns to the woman and responds, "take courage, my daughter." A blind beggar named Bartimaeus sits on the side of the road, begging for Jesus to restore his sight. Courage is a sign of our passion to fulfill what is right and just. The disciples, calling him over, identify the man, knicknaming him "Courage," as they say, get up; Jesus is calling you." Commissioning the disciples Jesus reminds them to have courage... as they remember the Psalmist's words, "have peace in me...In the world you will have hardship, but be courageous: I have conquered the world." Courage is the peace of Christ we carry into the chaos of life. Courage is our walking, one step in front of the other, willing to withstand turmoil and difficulty. Jesus anoints us with courage to soldier on.

Winston Churchill says, courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen. The prophet Elijah, zealous for the Lord, doesn't encounter God in the mighty hurricane, or the roar of the earthquake, or the thundering noise of the fire. Elijah hears God in the sound of a sheer silence. There, God equips Elijah with courage to serve as God's anointing agent for God's kingdom. Another writes, "Courage is the discovery that you may not win and trying when you know you can lose." This could be the trademark verse for faithful Peter, who just is always

opening his mouth, inserting his foot, impetuously making promises he can't fulfill, denying Jesus, failing and losing, only to be commissioned as a chief leader to unfold the church. Courage is our faith road to humility.

There is the story of the priest, a minister and a rabbi, all out fishing away a beautiful summer morning, in a wide open lake. With the bright sun beaming overhead, the priest looks at his watch, and says, "it's time for lunch!" He puts down his rod, stands up and steps out of the boat, walking on the water, he reaches the shore, sits on the sandy beach and begins to eat his lunch. Watching, the minister puts down his rod, rubs his stomach, stands up and says, "I'm hungry too!" He too steps one foot and then another out of the boat, onto the water, reaches the sandy shore, sits down and enjoys his lunch, along side his fishing buddy. Now, the rabbi is watching in amazement and is thinking, "my faith is just as strong as theirs. If they can walk on the water, so can I!" So, the rabbi puts down his rod, adjusts his hat against the noonday rays, and with a clearer vision, steps out into the water. Immediately, down he goes, plunging into the water. Embarrassed, but not undaunted, soaking wet, the rabbi climbs back into the boat, readies himself and tries again. Again, plunging into the water, he begins to sink. Watching from the shoreline, the priest looks over at the minister shaking his head and says, "maybe we should show him where the rocks are!"

Let's not be mistaken, my fellow boaters, we're not meant to walk on the water. If we try it, we'll sink. We're not supposed to be saving ourselves. That's Jesus' job. He's the real hero in the story. He's the one, the Lord of the wind and sky and sea. The one who walks on the water, through the turmoil and treacherous dangers and worries of life, who gets right up to us and says, don't be afraid, it's me, I'm right here and takes our hand and gets us back in the boat where suddenly the winds are calm, the tides are lulling, and the light of the early dawn hope breaks through. That's Jesus' courage. Our courage is to have faith, trust, belief, in the healing, helping, holding, restoring power of Jesus; that he's walking right towards us, that if we jump out of the boat, we'd better be asking for his help, because there's no way we can tread water without him. Jesus is our all in all.

So, we have to ask ourselves the same question Jesus asks, why do you doubt? Have faith. Can we believe that Jesus is with us, always, everywhere, even when the waters are rough and we're caught up in a whirlwind of hurt and confusion and doubt; when we're just not so sure Jesus is with us or even showing up? When we're looking so hard for Jesus to save us, we don't even recognize him when his saving grace and his love is plunged right into our very souls? Why do we doubt? Well, maybe it is we just need a little more *encouragement*. Maybe we're just not spending enough time with those people who serve as supporters and encouragers for us in our struggles. What we learn from Jesus, is the more we act like Jesus, the more we're like Jesus. So, maybe it is that we're supposed to be those people of courage, those tellers of Jesus' truth and reinforcement for what is good and right and just so others can have courage also.

Our beloved John Wayne said, “courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway.” Another great thinker said, “courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.” May we know always, our something else, our encourager, our sustainer, our holy presence, the only one who saves, with his love and great mercy is our great God in Jesus Christ, who can weather any storm, provide us with all we need.

Back in the boat, saved, cuddled up, warm and dry, sailing across the calm Sea, lovingly reassured by Jesus, a new day begins. Breathing a deep sigh of relief, and awed by his saving grace, the disciples, humbly bow down in worship to the one who comes save, Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, God with us, now and forever. Strengthened with Jesus, the disciples sail on, encouraged. The story continues. The disciples, along with Jesus, make the crossing to the other side of the Sea to land at Gennesaret where their work becomes all the more challenging. Because, this is how it is in our story continues. The work needs to be done. The challenges still need to be conquered. There are places to venture, opportunities to seize. But, with Jesus, instead we live not afraid, but with the courage of faith: Fear paralyzes. Faith empowers. Fear discourages. Faith encourages. Fear sickens and wounds. Faith rescues and heals. Fear renders us useless. Faith empowers us for service. Fear sucks away hope. Faith fills us with hope, and with hope comes courage. Have faith, my fellow boaters, faith in the persevering, strength of Jesus Christ, to lift us out of any doubt or danger. In faith, put your fear into the hand of God and sail on. Be a champion of courage.