



“Living in the Shadows: Fear”

Mark 4:35-41

March 17, 2019

For more than five years now, our family routine has included the reading of several books at bedtime each evening. Thanks to the kindness of family and friends nearby and far away, we have an abundance from which to choose. Of course, we have our own favorites, stories we have had memorized since childhood and can narrate without looking at the book. But it has also been wonderful to read new books and learn new stories. As we've worked our way through the shelves full of books, I have noticed an emerging trend in children's literature—a fixation on the topic of fear. Fear of monsters, of the dark, of thunder, of doctors and dentists, of nightmares, of separation from parents and, of course, fear of the potty. One of my favorites is Mo Willems tale of *Leonardo the Terrible Monster*. Leonardo is a terrible monster because, no matter how he tries, he cannot scare anyone. Of course, children's books tend to be written by adults and therefore tell us a lot about ourselves. What I learn from reading these books, and from a quick scan of bestseller lists and popular media of all types, is that we belong to a culture of fear and that the most important task for any of us is overcoming what once frightened us. We love the stories about people who have triumphed over the panic that once held them back. We are comforted by accounts of quelled fear because they suggest that we too may be able to defeat those fears that keep us up at night and wake us too early in the morning.

Which brings us to this morning's gospel text from Mark and this week's Lenten shadow. It is after dark, perhaps the middle of the night, and Jesus and his disciples are aboard a boat when a storm arises. It is no ordinary storm. Mark, usually understated in his descriptive language, paints the picture in vivid detail. Waves beating against the boat, water gushing in on all sides, the very real possibility of capsizing in the middle of the sea.

And then there is Jesus, fast asleep on a cushion in the midst of the storm, unshaken by the wind and waves. In fact, Jesus might have missed the entire ordeal if not for the disciples' decision to wake him. When they do, they are filled with anger and dread—don't you care about us?

Don't you recognize the threat we're under? Aren't you concerned...or afraid?

Well, in the space of one short, matter-of-fact verse, Jesus wakes up, chastises the wind for interrupting his slumber and commands the sea to knock it off. At this point, there is an absolute calm. No wind, no waves, no rocking boat, no screaming disciples. We might expect everyone to head to bed at this point, grateful for the averted disaster and intent on a few hours of rest.

Instead, there is a fascinating encounter between Jesus and his disciples. After the storm is calmed, Jesus senses their fear. What was anger has become terror—“why are you afraid?” Though the disciples do not answer Jesus' question directly, their response is clear as, in wonder and fear, they ask one another... “who is this, that even wind and sea obey him? They are more frightened by the power of Jesus to calm the storm than by the storm's power to take their lives.

Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him? It is a moment of revelation for the disciples, the realization that in Jesus they may be encountering more than a wise teacher and religious sage. There might be more to this man than a domesticated message of simple moral behaviors and feel good words of encouragement. We disciples might be asked to change, to grow, to follow him into the unknown. The storm has passed, but the fearful journey is only beginning.

We are told that the disciples were filled with awe, a strange word suggesting a mix of wonder, reverence, and fear that is often the response of human beings to the presence of God in scripture: Moses before the burning bush, Isaiah standing in the temple, Peter on Pentecost, Paul on the road to Damascus. Wonder, reverence, and fear: an appropriate response to an encounter with the power of the living God. No wonder those disciples were filled with wonder and fear. The tempest on the sea is no match for the power of Jesus; the storm was frightening, but Jesus' response was awe-inspiring.

Too often, I believe, we preach a safe and tame Jesus, an

antidote to our fears and a remedy for all that ails us. Just consider how different this message is than the one that the disciples encounter in the ministry of Jesus. His path leads not to a sanctuary of safety or a throne of power but to a cross lifted up at Golgotha...place of the skull. The journey of Jesus takes his disciples into the valleys, not around them. Jesus encountered the shadows of fear that also grip us. When we commit to live as his followers, we do not escape the world. In fact, the life of discipleship comes with its own fears.

In recent years, many faith communities and leaders have sought to correct this unfortunate error on Jesus' part. They have downplayed the seriousness of the gospel and replaced it with feel-good messages designed to entice emerging generations of potential Christians. Gone is the image of the cross, an outdated and overly imposing symbol of the faith. Gone are messages of repentance and discipleship, replaced by a theology of self-congratulation and easy success. All happiness and no awe. All reward and no risk. Christianity-lite, custom-made for the 21st Century.

What is missing from this strategy and message, I believe, is an encounter with Jesus. An encounter like the one the disciples had on the boat, that left them filled with wonder *and* fear. Feel-good faith might suffice when everything is going your way, when life is easy and the news is all good. But sometimes we get hurt, or we hurt someone else. Sometimes decisions are difficult. Sometimes relationships are broken. Sometimes the medical tests show troubling signs. Sometimes the future is uncertain. Sometimes we cannot just move on, quell the fear, or stop the pain. Sometimes human life is complicated and the answers are not easy. Sometimes, it is not enough to smile and pretend everything is okay. The shadows of fear return again and again.

Not long ago, I was talking with a friend whose life had become unmanageable. Falling in with the wrong crowd produced short-term feelings of delight and amusement, but the emptiness was more persistent. Feelings of hopelessness and depression came quickly after waking from a late night of fun. My friend explained the struggle to come to a place of decision once rock bottom had been reached. It was time to make a change. I applauded the decision and promised my support and care, but then my friend began to cry: "I'm afraid. I've gotten so accustomed to this way of life and changing is much scarier than staying the same. What if I fail, disappoint myself and others?" The fear of the storm is no match for the terror of trying to live a new way.

In these moments, comfort comes when you remember who else is in the boat. For starters, you can look around the sanctuary this morning for a picture of fellow travelers who share this journey of faith. When the shadows of fear threaten to overtake you, they can provide rays of light that break through the shadows. And then there is Jesus, the one with the power to calm the winds and still the sea, the one who will continue to draw us in, even through the fears and storms that swirl around us. What he offers is not a quick fix or an easy route around all our fears. Instead, he promises to stay in the boat with us, though the waters roar and the waves crash against us.

When I was in the fourth grade, I begged my parents for a puppy. At first, they resisted, then I think they decided to use the request as an opportunity to teach responsibility. If the dog belonged to me, so did the chores. We built a dog pen in the backyard and I had my list. Food and water in the morning and evening. Walks in the afternoon. Clean the pen every weekend. Keep a calendar of appointments and vaccines. I did well for the first couple of months, but then we moved the clocks back and it began getting dark earlier. And Smokey's pen was down the hill, a long way from the back door. I remember setting out with a bowl for food and walking those steps down into the darkened yard. I remember the feeling of fear each time. I would run down the hill, pour out the food and water, and run back. I did this night after night, fearful as I ran down and relieved when I made it to the door. And then, one night, I was coming back up the hill and I saw something I had never seen before. My Dad was standing at the back door watching me. I realized immediately that he had his own nightly ritual—standing and waiting for me to return. Hope in the midst of fear.

The greatest risk of all, and the most life-changing decision you will ever make, is to get into the boat with Jesus. The storms are sure to come; the winds will blow and the sea will rage. The old fears will return, with attempts to convince you to give up and give in. And then, in the most terrifying moments of all, you will be called beyond the storms to moments of transformation. My advice to you is to summon your courage and leave the shoreline behind. The shadows of fear will surely follow, but the boat is waiting and you are meant to be on board. Amen.