

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Faith in the Midst of Fear

Matthew 8:18-27

Last weekend, a line of storms hit the southeastern United States, killing at least 18 people, and leaving a line of destruction from Mississippi to Georgia. One of the places most severely damaged was Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Hattiesburg includes the campus of William Carey University, a Baptist institution named after the man considered the founder of modern Protestant missions. A tornado injured seven students and damaged nearly all of the 30 buildings on the campus. The campus includes a memorial garden with a six foot bronze statue called "The Risen Christ." On each side of the statue's base are Scriptures. Rising up from the base is a figure of Jesus, arms uplifted and hands stretched out in blessing.

After the storm had passed, someone took a photo of the garden. Trees were snapped apart, pushed over, or stripped bare. Fragments of roof and lumber were scattered about. A long rope or cord of some sort was wrapped over some bushes. And right behind the statue of Jesus was a bright red trashcan lying on its side, with some of its contents strewn around. But still, in the midst of all the devastation and chaos, the risen Christ stood just as tall and just as serene looking as ever.

There's a Christian song that says of the Lord, "Sometimes He calms the storm, and other times He calms His child."¹ In today's Scripture passage, Jesus does both. Our text takes us away from the safety of the shore and onto the risky and unpredictable waters, where Jesus is resting comfortably, seemingly without a worry in the world. His disciples, on the other hand, are in full panic mode, and rightfully so. They recognize a legitimate threat when they see it, especially one that puts their own existence in danger. So they wake Jesus, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" (v. 25).

As one preacher has pointed out, in Mark's telling of this story, the disciples' plea, in the King James Version, sounds more like it comes from the mouth of an English butler: "Master, carest thou not that we perish?" (4:38).² But the Greek, in Matthew or Mark, has the force of, "We're dying." There's a sense of doom about the disciples' situation. "We're going down and only you can save us." It reminds me of an old hymn we sang in my childhood church: "Jesus is able! To you who are driv'n, / Farther and farther from God and from Heav'n; / Helpless and hopeless, o'erwhelmed by the wave; / We throw out the lifeline—'tis, 'Jesus can save.'"

In our text, the disciples reach for the lifeline, and Jesus saves them by calming the storm. For the moment, they've been rescued from a watery grave. But remember that wind and waves aren't the only things endangering these disciples. They're still exposed to other perils, especially the deadly power of fear. You can hear it in the way Jesus responded to their cry for help: "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"

"Why are you so afraid?" Actually, you can probably join me in thinking of plenty of reasons. Afraid of sickness and physical decline. Afraid of death itself, or at least afraid of how we might die, especially the prospect of a slow, painful death. Afraid of losing a job or having little to live on. Afraid of being rejected by others. Afraid of what might happen to

our children. Afraid of being involved in an accident or being struck by a natural disaster. Afraid that the sins of our past will come back to do us in. Afraid of the future and what it might hold.

And often, afraid of one another. Afraid of people who are different from us in background, nationality, race, ethnicity, and religion. Afraid that our small, orderly worlds might be disrupted or that others intend to do us harm. In 2013, writer Eric Metaxas wrote about the issue of anger in America, and cited a *USA Today* study showing that the share of Americans who reported feeling angry or irritable had surged from 50 percent a couple of years earlier to 60 percent at the time. He also pointed to a Harvard Medical School study which found that nearly two-thirds of American teens admitted to having anger attacks that involved the destruction of property, threats of violence, or actually engaging in violence. According to Metaxas, what some describe as “America’s anger epidemic” also has to do with issues of unemployment, the economy, and for those who have work, overworking. “But we’re not only angry,” wrote Metaxas:

We’re also *afraid* . . . of one another. “For four decades,” reports the *Associated Press*, “a gut-level ingredient of democracy—trust in the other fellow—has been quietly draining away. These days, only one-third of Americans say most people can be trusted. Half felt that way in 1972.” The AP article concludes, “Forty years later, a record high of nearly two-thirds say ‘you can’t be too careful’ in dealing with people.”³

These days, the rising waters of suspicion, the howling winds of mistrust, and the relentless waves of perceived threat, make for a very volatile atmosphere. We’re drowning in fear.

Fear is a powerful thing. It can dominate our thoughts. It can determine our attitudes. It can dictate our actions. It can shape and control the size of the world in which we live and operate each day. In 1975, Roger Hart conducted a study on where children felt safe to play. He focused on a small town in Vermont, and followed a group of kids during the day, documenting everywhere they went by themselves. He then used that information to make maps and determine the average distance each child was allowed to go. In the process, Hart discovered that the children had remarkable freedom, traveling unsupervised throughout their neighborhoods. Some even had the run of the entire town. All the while, the kids’ parents weren’t worried.

Then in 2014, Hart went back to the same town to study the children of the children from his 1970s research. When he asked the children to show him where they played alone, they didn’t take him very far, basically just walking around their property. The huge circle of freedom had grown tiny. There was no free range outdoors. Parents needed to know where their kids were at all times. And all this while there was literally no more crime than there was 40 years earlier. So why the dramatic change in attitudes and actions? The reason was fear. The conclusion to Hart’s study was simple: Fear of the world outside our door narrows the circle of our lives.⁴

When Jesus first called his disciples, he was expanding the circle of their lives. True, they probably still spent most of their time in regions and places that were already familiar to them, like the lake in today’s story. But their sense of the geography of God’s reign was being stretched. In terms of kingdom mission and ministry, Jesus was taking his disciples into uncharted territory where they would be called upon to step out, take risks, and exercise faith. In the first half of today’s Scripture passage, an expert in the religious law comes to Jesus and says, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus replies, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head” (v. 20). Or as Eugene Peterson renders it, “Are you ready to rough it? We’re not staying in the best inns, you know.”⁵ Maybe this uprooted way of life was one of the

reasons Jesus could sleep so soundly virtually anywhere, including a boat being tossed around on the water.

Then another fairly recent recruit comes to Jesus and says, "Don't get me wrong, Lord. I'm still with you. But first I need a couple of days off to take care of my dad's funeral." But Jesus replied, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Okay, so much for compassion and pastoral care. We could debate the different ways of interpreting Jesus' statement, but Matthew's point is pretty clear, namely, that nothing is to take priority over Jesus' call to discipleship.

So I give the disciples credit. They had the faith to get into the boat with Jesus in the first place. True, when the storm comes out of nowhere, we see how weak and unsteady their faith can be. One minute they're willing to launch out with the Lord and head to the other side. The next minute fright threatens to engulf their confidence in his power and compassion. But remember that Jesus' faithfulness is greater than their fearfulness. The disciples aren't in this boat alone. Jesus is with them. And what he has been doing to diseases and demons, Jesus now does to creation's fury. He speaks the word, and the chaos is conquered.

In many places, the chaos still threatens. For lots of Jesus' followers, the storm takes the form of persecution. Open Doors recently released its 2017 World Watch List, identifying the top 50 countries where it's hardest to be a Christian. These included North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and many others. Some of the greatest threats are being driven by Islamic extremism, ethnic nationalism, and government restriction. According to the report, approximately 215 million Christians experience high, very high, or extreme persecution. In some cases, Christians are harassed, pastors are beaten, and churches are burned. In other cases, Christians risk imprisonment, loss of home and assets, torture, beheadings, rape, and even death. All in all, the worldwide persecution of people who identify themselves with Jesus has hit a new high.

Closer to home, the threats may not be as extreme, but the storms are just as real. The Christian faith and the community of Christ's people now exist much more on the margins of our society. Instead of holding a place of great cultural influence, the church now finds itself living over against a culture where trends, attitudes, and actions run counter to the way of Jesus and contrary the values of God's kingdom. Christian influence is in decline. Many congregations have either plateaued or are shrinking. Huge portions of the population are simply indifferent toward the church. The waters of discouragement seem to be rising fast.

But remember that we're still a fellowship of people who have gotten in the boat with Jesus. In fact, some of the fears we face simply come with the territory. They're part of what it means to leave a familiar shore and to trust Jesus to take us toward new horizons where he'll continue to do his work and accomplish his mission, in us and through us. In other words, be assured that Jesus isn't snoozing his way through our struggles and fright. He's still with us, responsive to our cries for help and our pleas for rescue. Whether we're talking about the fears you face on a daily basis because of the times in which we live, or the fears we face as a community of believers in a world that resists the reign of God, Jesus is still present to calm the chaos—the chaos outside us and the chaos within us.

¹ Scott Krippayne. "Sometimes He Calms the Storm." *Wild Imagination*, Word Records, 1995.

² Richard Lischer, "Resurrection and Rhetoric." In *Marks of the Body of Christ*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 16.

³ Eric Metaxas, "Angry America," Break Point Commentaries (December 10, 2013).

⁴ From NPR, "World Without Fear." *Invisibilia* podcast (January 15, 2015).

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 24.