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Season after Pentecost
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Faith and Fear

Mark 4:35-41 *He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"
And they were filled with great awe and said to one another,
'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'*

Jesus and the disciples shove off from land into the Sea of Galilee. It is nightfall, a precarious time to be crossing any body of water. But the disciples are going at Jesus' word. They are doing what disciples do—taking Jesus at his word, doing what he calls us to do, going where he calls us to go. Sounds risky, doesn't it?

Israel was not a sea-faring people. Fishing was a livelihood for some. But for the most part, they were farmers, craftspeople, and merchants, not sailors. The sea held a great sense of foreboding for Israel. In the Genesis 1 story, God created the world by containing the churning, swirling primeval waters. "Creation out of nothing" is not really the biblical view. God creates by bringing life-sustaining order to chaos. "The spirit of God brooded above the waters," says the story. The sea represented chaos, contained by God's creating power, but always threatening to break into the world. Outside the great temple in Jerusalem stood a huge stone basin filled with water. It was called the "stone sea." When worshipers passed by it on the way into the temple, they were reminded of the gracious power of God holding back the waters of chaos.

So, here are these Jewish disciples with their rabbi, at night, out on a body of water known for sudden, fierce squalls. Sure enough, a windstorm rises up and the waves are filling their boat. We cannot know exactly what went through the disciples' minds at this moment. Among more earthy thoughts may have been psalmist's words, with fresh reality and meaning: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck...I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me." (Ps. 69) Or another: "Some went down to the sea in ships...They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity...Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble...." (Ps. 107)

That is just what the disciples do. They cry to their rabbi out of their fear. Jesus is back at the stern of the boat, sleeping on the helmsman's cushion. How can Jesus sleep through such a storm? Doesn't he care about his disciples? Jesus seems to embody other words from the psalmist: "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety." (Ps. 4) Or this: "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives sleep to his beloved" (Ps. 127) The disciples and Jesus are literally "in the same boat," suffering the same threat. But the disciples are overcome with fear, while Jesus sleeps peacefully.

"Teacher, don't you care that we are dying here?" There may have been some buried resentment in their question. They wouldn't be out on this lake, in the dark of night, being swamped by the waves, if it weren't for Jesus. They were on HIS mission, after all. He had gotten them into this mess. Life would have been so easy if they hadn't taken up with him and his talk of the kingdom of God.

Jesus wakes up, speaks a quick rebuke to the wind and waves, and everything quiets down. Then Jesus has a word for the disciples. Not, "Are you all okay?," or "Gee, I'm sorry you're all wet and cold and scared." But "Why are you afraid?" How can

Jesus say that? Didn't he see the storm, all that chaos washing over them? Yet, Jesus still asks them why they allowed themselves to be overcome with fear. The word here (*deilos*) means "cowardice" or "timidity." It assumes that the disciples had it in them to face the storm, whatever it might bring. They lost confidence and let the outward chaos, the outward storm, take away their inward peace. Jesus doesn't question the reality of the storm and its threat. But he calls the disciples to look at themselves and how they allowed the outward chaos to turn their hearts to jelly. Jesus is getting at something basic to the life of faith—the overcoming of our fears so that we can live as witnesses to the truth of God's love in Christ, so that we can bear witness to God's order of peace, justice, and compassion in the storms of greed, violence, and indifference to the suffering of humans and the creation itself.

But Jesus has a second question: "Have you still no faith?" He presses the issue further. It has to do with faith. In this context, faith means the opposite of the kind of fear that had gripped the disciples. The biblical meaning of faith has nothing to do with WHAT we believe. It doesn't mean having the right ideas or the correct, orthodox BELIEFS about God or Jesus or the Bible. The opposite of faith is not intellectual doubt or the spiritual vacuum we experience when former understandings collapse and new ones have not yet appeared. Jesus links faith and fear.

Faith means living as a follower of Christ in the midst of a world that is often contrary to all that Christ embodies—the love of God working to redeem life. Faith is not a conviction that everything will be okay, for it may not be, or that nothing difficult or painful will happen to us. Paul Tillich defined faith as ultimate trust, a deep confidence in God's care and sovereignty over all of life, even when the circumstances around us offer no evidence of it. "Have you STILL no faith?" asks Jesus. Have you not yet come to that deeper place in yourself where you trust God in all things? Have you still not found that center that, to borrow words from T.S. Elliot, is a "still point" in a turning world? It is what Howard Thurman called "an island of peace within one's soul." He writes: "We are all of us deeply involved in the throes of our own weaknesses and strengths, expressed often in the profoundest conflicts within our own souls. The only hope for surcease, the only possibility of stability for the person, is to establish an Island of Peace within one's soul...Well within the island is the Temple where God dwells—not the God of the creed, the church, the family, but the God of one's heart...How foolish it is, how terrible, if you have not found your Island of Peace within your own soul! It means that you are living without the discovery of your true home." (Meditations of the Heart)

As the story ends, the disciples have another kind of "fear": "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" A different word is used here, which means "awe" or "reverence." It is hard to catch the depth of meaning. It is the same thing meant by the biblical phrase "the fear of God." It has to do with "hallowing" the name of God, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. This kind of fear, or awe, is that deepest of responses in us when we are in the presence of the Holy, the sacred foundation of life. Gandhi wrote: "There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it though I don't see it...I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever changing and ever dying, there is underlying all that change a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates. This informing power or spirit is God." (The Way to God) Faith that has touched this kind of "awe," this kind of "fear," can sing "He's got the whole world in his hands" even and especially when the world looks to be in anyone else's hands but God's!

There comfort for us as we see that these first disciples didn't quite get it either! Like us, they still hadn't found that center, that core, that Island of Peace within their souls. But what greater comfort that Jesus didn't give up on them. He still saw them as capable of having the kind of faith that overcomes fear, the kind of faith that lets us live peacefully in an unpeaceful world, that lets us keep to the truth when swamped by untruth, that keeps us compassionate when surrounded by injustice and indifference. Jesus didn't give up on them and doesn't give up on us. The Christian life and mission is not to wallow in our sinfulness. The Gospel isn't that we are utterly helpless and miserable creatures, worthy only of God's scorn and punishment. That's not Good News. The Good News is God's unchanging, steadfast love for us that never gives up on us, that in Christ gives us the life of ultimate trust. Jesus keeps on leading the disciples, teaching them, showing them the way of faith that overcomes their fears. He doesn't assume we today can't have such faith, but that we can indeed live such a life in his company.

Susan Henderson shared with me a sermon by Killian Noe, former member of the Church of the Saviour, now pastor of the New Creation Church in Seattle, Washington. She tells this personal story, which illustrates very well the kind of faith at issue in the story of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. She and her husband Bernie were whitewater rafting in North Carolina when they were thrown from their boat. She writes:

“There we were in the freezing, fast rapids—being carried down river toward the deadly Wesser Falls. Several people frantically yelled instructions from the river bank. They warned, Don't try to get yourself out. Just let go and let the river carry you. They went on to say, We will get you out. We'll drop ropes from the overpass one mile down river. I heard their instructions. But my overwhelming instinct was to get myself out of that river, to save myself, to make myself secure. I kept trying to put my feet down, to stand up—which as some of you know is the surest way to drown in white water. Finally, I managed to catch a glimpse of Bernie's head bobbing in the white caps. His face looked so peaceful, so in the moment—so free, just going with the flow—like he was actually enjoying the ride. Meanwhile, I was becoming exhausted from struggling to stand up and from being knocked over so many times by the strong current. Eventually, I surrendered, let go, and let the river carry me; trusting that what I needed would be given. The ropes were dropped, as promised, and we were safe.” (“Let God and Trust God,” sermon by Killian Noe, www.slschool.org)

I think that the life of faith we have undertaken is a matter of two things: our response to God's call in Christ to be and to do the Good News of God's kingdom, and our complete trust in God's care and power that underlies all creation. Christ's call, we can be sure, will take us out on some lake, at nightfall, with a storm likely to come up. The way of our own personal transformation and the way of responding to some call to serve others and the world—the inward and the outward journeys—will bring challenge, struggle, and resistance, our own and that of the world. We will have fears. But our very fear can be the doorway to faith itself, bringing us to deeper levels of trust and confidence in God.

We can find that quiet center in ourselves, where we live in Christ, where we stand in awe of God's presence and care through all creation. We can deepen and enlarge that center through prayer so that the storms around us and in us spend themselves, or at the least lose their power to cast us into fear.