

Faith and Fear

Psalm 9:9-20 *The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.*

Mark 4:35-41 *He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"*

Sharon Salzberg, an American Zen Buddhist master and teacher, tells of being at a retreat where one day she was talking with another participant. Before long, she said, they were angrily debating some philosophical difference. Afterwards Salzberg reflected. "Here we were," she thought, "just two people afraid to die." Fear of death may well be at the root of all our other fears and anxiousness. The point she was making is that fear lies at the core of our inability to live and love fully. It may be fear of death. It may be fear of life.

All of us have fear. If we do not acknowledge, understand, and calm our fears, we cannot live fully and freely as God has made us to live. Having fears does not mean we are bad or weak. What matters is how we respond to our fears, how we work with them. If we are afraid of our fears, pretending they are not there or avoiding them, they dominate us. We become withdrawn or defensive. If we look at our fears, understand what they are attached to, then we can live more fearlessly, with more peacefulness and freedom.

The story from Mark is about fear and faith, which Jesus sees as opposites. The disciples are ordinary human beings like us who become afraid. We can identify with them. When Jesus reprimands his disciples for their fearfulness and lack of faith, however, he is assuming that they are fully capable of being fearless, but have not quite gotten there yet. Mark's gospel was written sometime in the 70's CE, the decade of the ferocious persecution by the Emperor Nero. This story was cherished by the early Christian community which faced possible extermination by Rome, as well as struggles within and among some of its communities. Overcoming fear was THE important spiritual work for the Christian community. It was the definition of faith.

The Sea of Galilee was known for sudden and violent squalls. The disciples are in a boat with Jesus going to the other side of the lake when a storm arises. Jesus is tired from a day of teaching, and is asleep on a cushion in the stern. Notice the contrast--Jesus sleeping peacefully, and the disciples who are in a terrified panic and frantically wake him up. "Jesus, don't you care that we are in trouble here?" Jesus wakes up and commands the storm to die down. Then he says to them: "Why are you afraid? Do you not yet have any faith?" Why are you still living out of your fear? You don't yet understand what faith really is, do you? It is the opposite of fear. It is peacefulness, trustfulness, not being dominated by our fears.

Jesus knew the lake's reputation for storms that could engulf you at any moment. Just like life! Anything can happen anytime. We don't control life. Yet we cling to the illusion that one day everything will be nailed down just the way we want it. That will never happen. We are having a good day, things are rolling along, and it feels like clear sailing. Then someone hits us with a complaint or criticism, or we have a flat tire, or our leaders decide to start another war. Things never settle down, and a big part of spiritual maturity is coming to grips with that reality. The nature of life is change, and faith has to do with how we embrace this. We can learn from Jesus to be peaceful while knowing that anything can happen at any moment. Faith has to do with our inner life, not the circumstances around us. This is not a denial that there are storms, problems, conflicts, and so forth. It is about the way we live WITHIN all those things in an open, peaceful, and trustful way. We think we can find a place where there are no storms, no turbulence. No such place exists. The best good news is that we can find a way of living peacefully, trustingly, and with openness in the midst of storms.

Something in Jesus enables him to sleep in the midst of the storm. We can, according to Jesus, have that same thing in us. It is called FAITH. Here is the clearest picture in the whole New Testament of what faith is and is not. It is not beliefs about Jesus, or God, or anything else. In two commentaries on this story, the scholars said that the problem was that the disciples did not have faith that Jesus was the Son of God. That is not correct. There is nothing in the story to warrant such a definition of faith. Faith in the way Jesus talks about it and lives it has nothing to do with thinking the right religious thoughts. It is not about our religion being better than someone else's. It has to do with whether or not we are actually living with a deep trust in God, in life. It has to do with whether we are dominated by our fears or are working in our inward journey to embrace and understand our fears in the presence and love of God who made the seas and the winds. This is what Jesus was teaching.

This is why we look to Jesus, so that we can grow in the way of faithful, fearless living.

If you look closely at the gospel stories, especially the Gospel of Mark, you begin to see that Jesus believed we have it in us to be fearless, to be faith-full. His reprimand of the disciples is not a belittling putdown. He BELIEVES in them. Yes, he is disappointed. But he still believes they can grow in their capacity to have more faith than fear. Jesus believes that we can become less fearful and more faithful, and we can grow in this way as we live in his presence, listen to his words, and draw from his spirit.

Jesus' own faith is a challenge and comfort to his disciples, and to us. When they say to each other, "Who IS this guy that even the wind and sea obey him?" they are marveling at his deep and complete faith, his fearlessness. When you have such faith, even a little bit, like the tiny mustard seed, you have already overcome the fierce winds and seas of life. They see it in Jesus. He tries to show them that it is in them, too, and never gives up on them.

Jesus taught and showed by his own life that faith is a deep trust in God, in life, that enables us to embrace and quiet our fears as we live the life of God's kingdom. When we practice this kind of faith, we are helping not only ourselves but also those around us. This is why we make our commitments to be on an inward journey, keeping a daily practice of prayer, reflection, meditation, study, and quiet sitting. As we do this more and more, we are able to identify and embrace our fears with compassion. We simply let our anxiousness and fretful thinking settle down and become quiet, not trying to drive out our fear, making a battlefield of our inner life, and not judging and condemning ourselves because we have fear.

As we grow in our capacity to understand and compassionately embrace our fears, they lose their power. The storms begin to subside. When we are running from our fears, we relate to people with impatience, anger, or violence. An angry person is most often a fearful person who perhaps has been hurt and is afraid of being hurt again. When we embrace our fears, seek to understand what they are attached to, and treat them with compassion, things begin to change. So we practice compassion with our own fears and with others in their fear. This is learning from Jesus how to be at peace and to calm storms, how to have faith.

Being in community is important to the transforming of our fears into faith. We need a community that practices the inward journey of rooting its life deeper in God and the calming and understanding of fears. When I am struggling with my fears, feeling anxious and uncentered, the community helps me settle down, quiet myself, and encourages me to look into my fear with compassion and understanding. This happens in mission groups when we share our reports on how we are doing with our spiritual commitments. Others simply listen quietly and acceptingly as we talk about our fear and seek to understand where it is coming from. They encourage us to keep accepting and looking into our fears. Or we can meet with another person in our community who is willing to listen without judgment and with calmness. If we as a community are grounding our lives in God through Jesus, then we are providing for each other the kind of solidity we need to work with our fears so that we become increasingly fearless. I think it is also very important to the life of our society and world that there be communities of faith that are doing this disciplined spiritual work. A community that is working with its fears, not letting fear rule its life, becomes a source of peacefulness and faithful, courageous living for a city, country, and world so filled with fear.

At our School for Christian Living scripture study Wednesday night, after we had discussed this story from Mark's gospel, Kaye asked a most important question, which she was also asking herself. What would you be doing if you were not afraid? This question is at the heart of who we are as a faith community. It is the question of call and what keeps us from living out of call. What do we each feel that God has called us to be and do? And what are the fears that are keeping us from that call? If we are working with such questions in our own lives, we are becoming free from our fears and moving closer to the called life. This is what Jesus was trying to teach the disciples. Why are you afraid? Do you not yet have faith? Jesus is not condemning us. He believes that we have it in us to live fearlessly, to live faithfully. As we follow Jesus the living Christ and live in his presence, we become more and more who he believes us to be.