

June 24, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

## Faith and Fear

*Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32 / They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity...*

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

All of us have fear. However, if we acknowledge, understand, and calm our fears, we can live more 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 and work with our fears. If we are afraid of our fears, pretending they are not there or avoiding them, we make things worse and our fears dominate us. If we look at our fears, understand what they are attached to, then we can gain insight and live more fearlessly, with more peacefulness and freedom.

The story from Mark is about fear and faith, which, I think, Jesus sees as opposites. The disciples are ordinary human beings like us who become afraid. When Jesus reprimands his disciples for their lack of faith, he is assuming that they are fully capable of being fearless, but are not quite there yet. Mark's gospel was written 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 dispiriting struggles within some of its communities. Overcoming fear was THE important spiritual work for the 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, tired from a long day of teaching, is asleep on a cushion in the stern. Notice the contrast--Jesus sleeping peacefully, and the disciples frantic and trying to wake him up. "Jesus, don't you care that we are in trouble here? How can you sleep?" I find this scene a little humorous. Have you ever

been with someone who is very upset and anxious, consumed with agitation because of something or other? This person tries to draw others into the fray, to join his or her disturbed state. Getting others to join us in our fears does nothing to help anyone or anything.

Jesus wakes up, calms the storm, and says to them: “Why are you afraid? Do you not yet have any faith?” You are still living out of your fear. You don’t yet understand what faith really is--peacefulness, trustfulness, experiencing but not being dominated by fear.

Jesus knew that on the lake a storm 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. 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, in other words, with faith.

This story gives us one of the clearest pictures in scripture of what faith is and is not. It is not beliefs about Jesus, or God, or anything else. In two commentaries I read 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. Nothing in the story warrants such a conclusion. Faith, the way Jesus talks about it and lives it, has nothing to do with thinking the right religious thoughts. It is about living with a deep trust in God, in life. It is about our 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 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 and Jesus' teachings, 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 is disappointed, yet he still believes they, and we, can grow to have more faith than fear. 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 complete faith, his deep connection with God, thus 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.

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. If we are doing this individually and as a community, we provide peace, strength, and hope for others. And then we find in ourselves the fearlessness, or courage, you might say, to do the things we feel God calls us to do.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master, worked to help the South Vietnamese boat people, who were escaping the conditions in their country following the end of the Vietnam War. Many people would crowd into small boats and journey across dangerous seas, facing harsh weather and the assaults of pirates. A storm would come up and threaten to swamp the crowded boats. When this happened, it was easy for people to panic out of their fear,

and chaos would only add to the danger. But if one person, says Thich Nhat Hanh, can stay calm and aware, this is enough to bring peace to the whole situation and save many lives.

I thought of this during the week as I remembered Beth Mahler and all that her life meant to this community and beyond. We know that she was a quiet, deep person of faith. She took the work of the inward journey very seriously, and made it integral to her daily life. In meetings or other gatherings, if things got tense or anxious, if people were upset or did not know what to do, she was more often than not the one in the boat who helped everyone become calm and quiet enough to begin listening to each other, to their own hearts, and to God. This is faith as quieting fears so that we can become open to the answer, the solution, the way that will be opened for us.

To me, this is what Jesus meant by faith. It was not belief in him, for he seems to imply that the disciples could have taken care of the situation themselves. And I don't think it is about performing miracles. I think it is about being surrounded at times by very fearful conditions, or having our own lives filled with emotions that are overwhelming. It may be facing something that seems catastrophic personally, as a community, or as a people. In this day and time, it may be facing the realities that we are destroying our own home, the earth, and with it our own lives and the lives of our children and their children.

The answer, the way out, the insight that brings light, whatever it is that we need comes not by fearful, anxious, and fretful activity or thinking. It comes as we are able to calm and quiet ourselves, so that we can listen, be attentive, gain insight, and then know what to do or not do. The real miracle is not changing the external situation, the storm. The true miracle is that we can calm and quiet ourselves, as persons and as a community, and then go beyond our fears to see clearly and then do what needs to be done.

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 storms and fear.