

WHY ARE YOU AFRAID?
Mark 4:35-41

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21 June 2015

Schools are no longer safe places. We learned that at Columbine. We re-learned it at Newtown, Connecticut. Movie theaters are no longer safe places, not since Aurora, Colorado. And this week we have lost sanctuaries.

When I heard about Charleston, my first thought was this place. I thought not only about this place, but I thought specifically about this place this past Monday night. As we gathered here to celebrate the life of one of our beloved members, we surrounded one another to provide comfort for each other. This room was full and so we were seated close to one another, and that closeness helped to ease our pain.

I'm sure all of our hearts were breaking this week as we became aware of the murders of nine people who were gathered at their church. As if a racially-motivated crime wasn't bad enough, it happened in church, the place we come to experience the presence of the holy. As I wrote on Thursday morning, "I pray for those people whose sanctuary has become a place of violence, fear and loss."

The word "sanctuary" is rooted in the word "holy". Synonyms for sanctuary include these: refuge, haven, harbor, oasis, shelter, retreat, and port in a storm. This room has been all of those things to us. I know it has to me.

And I believe it was an experience of sanctuary that Jesus is seeking when he steps into a boat at the end of a long day of teaching. Sometimes the crowds won't leave him alone. "Please, Jesus, just one more story." "Heal my brother, please." "Come to my house, Jesus; my child is so sick." Sometimes he has to get away. And

sometimes he needs to take his ministry to other places, new places. “Let us go across to the other side,” he says as he steps into the boat. And he must be exhausted, because he falls asleep and sleeps through a horrific storm. We know how quickly storms can come up on the lake and how frightening they can be. This one terrifies the disciples and they want Jesus to do something about it. So they wake him up, their fear tinged with anger. “Jesus, don’t you care that we’re about to die?” He wakes up, calms the wind with a word, then says to the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Sharp words, aren’t they? They are pointed and carry a bit of sting. Almost as if to say, “If you knew I had the power to calm the storm, why were you so afraid?” “If you knew I was here, if you had faith in me, why did you let your fears dominate you?”

This is a teaching moment for Jesus, and a learning moment for the disciples. It’s a lesson we see repeated throughout the Bible, and especially in the New Testament.

A young woman - she’s about 13 - is awakened in the middle of the night. Is someone outside? Or was it a dream? She’s not sure. You know what it’s like when you’re awakened out of a deep sleep. You’re only half-awake, you’re not sure what’s real or even where you are sometimes. Then she realizes that someone is in her room, and that someone is speaking to her. “God is gracious,” the voice says, “Don’t be afraid.”

About nine months later, some shepherds are working the night shift. It’s an ordinary night. They’re doing their job, keeping an eye out for wolves, keeping the flock together. Then suddenly it’s anything but ordinary. Someone appears, seemingly out of

nowhere...almost as if from the sky...and that someone says to these shepherders, “Don’t be afraid! I’m bringing you good news.”

30 years later, again at night, Jesus says to the disciples, “Let’s cross the lake and go to the other side. Let’s bring the good news to the Gentiles, to the people everyone else ignores.” The disciples aren’t so sure this is a good idea. Why not stick to their own kind, to people they know? They want to stay in familiar territory, among people like them. “Jesus,” they want to say, “there are more people on our side of the lake who haven’t seen you yet. There are more people over here for you to teach and heal.” The disciples don’t want to cross to the other side of the lake; they’re nervous about spending time with the Gentiles. The Gentiles are different. They’re unclean. And it seems that Mother Nature is nervous about crossing the lake as well, for the lake starts to kick up squalls and pretty soon waves are pouring water into the boat. Where’s Jesus when all this is happening? Sleeping like a baby.

The disciples wake him up, displaying more than a slight bit of anger and frustration. “Jesus, don’t you care that we’re about to die?” Jesus doesn’t say anything to the disciples. Not yet. Instead he speaks to the wind and the sea. He says, “Peace! Be still!” Just like that the storm is over. Then, in the quiet, he speaks to the disciples and he says this, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

What do you think of Jesus here? Isn’t he being a little harsh? Of course the disciples were afraid of a powerful storm. They’re human, after all! Human beings experience fear.

Wasn’t the whole idea of the incarnation about Jesus knowing what human life is like? Isn’t that the reason God entered the world as a real human being? So that God

would know what our lives are like? So that we would never feel so alone again?

Jesus is supposed to know about emotions like fear! Why is he so intolerant of it?

Why does the Bible say, more than 100 times, “Fear not! Do not be afraid!”

Jesus says two things, actually, to the disciples, two related things. “Why are you afraid?” and “Have you still no faith?” Faith is intended, then, to be the antidote to fear. Faith is the armor that we put on that helps us face our fears.

It’s because God knows so much about humanity that we’re told, over 100 times in the Bible, “Don’t live in fear.” God knows that fear is a natural human experience. And God knows how crippling it can be...how much it can damage our own ability to thrive, and how much it can destroy our sense of community.

Isn’t it fear that fuels bigotry? Fear of the unknown? Fear of change? An irrational fear that, if other people attain civil rights or freedom or economic power, that somehow there will be less for us?

The disciples didn’t want to head to the other side of the lake. They were afraid of the unknown; they didn’t want to spend time with people who were different. But if you’re in the boat with Jesus, you spend time with all kinds of people and in all kinds of places. If you’re in the boat with Jesus, you still have fear, but your fear is accompanied by faith.

Faith doesn’t take away our fear; faith gives us a way to cope. Each tenet of our faith is an anchor that steadies the calming seas.

Life is full of experiences that make us afraid. Children in this church, this summer, are afraid as they head off to church camp for the first time. “Will I be homesick? Will anyone be nice to me? Will I make friends?” Youth are afraid of the

pressures of school and sports, making it to college, coping with relationships, trying to keep their parents happy.

I recently talked to a young couple who sends their children to preschool here at Jack and Jill. They told me how much they love the school and appreciate its educational philosophy. The dad said to me, “You know it’s scary to turn your kids over for the first time to someone else.” Parenting is one fearful adventure - the first time your child leaves home with another teenager behind the wheel, the first time your own child drives...you can’t count the number of times you worry about your children.

Going to the doctor can be frightening, as you worry about bumps and pains, and what they might mean.

Anyone in the working world today knows about fear. There are very few jobs that provide security. And those beyond their working days fear for their economic health as well.

I don’t need to go on. You know that fear is a part of our lives. What this scripture reminds us is that we don’t have to face fear alone. We have the resources of our faith. We have, most specifically, the knowledge that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing. Not unemployment. Not cancer. Not an economic downturn. Not divorce. Not the death of a loved one. In all these things, God is with us. Jesus is in the boat with us. We are not alone.

And we have one another, people to encourage and support us.

Here is the way fear works in our lives. The more afraid you are, the less able you are to love. Conversely, the more love you experience, the less fear you have in your life. Love and fear cannot exist in our hearts at the same time.

There are many times when issues are complicated and difficult to understand. There are some events, though, that are clear-cut. What happened in Charleston this week was a case of good vs. evil. Wednesday's night's actions were pure evil. By Friday, less than 48 hours later, the victims' families were speaking to the murderer. One by one, they talked about their losses, how much they will miss their loved ones. And one by one, they said to the 21-year-old who invaded their sanctuary, "I forgive you." "My family forgives you." They refused to let fear take away their ability to live in love.

I was listening to the report on the radio Friday afternoon. One of the commentators, usually quite eloquent and never at a loss for words, found himself choked up. He listened to the words of forgiveness, which came so quickly and were so clearly heart felt and he said this, "Those people are showing a depth of graciousness and spirit that's almost beyond fathoming." The people of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston have seen evil. But they chose to get in the boat with Jesus, face their fears, and cross over to the other side, to the side of good, to the side of love.

We live in troubled times. There is much to be afraid of. As people of God, we are told how to respond. Fear is natural, and we will experience it, but we are not to stay in a state of fear. We are to move, with Jesus, from fear to actions of love and grace and forgiveness. Let's get in the boat and move to the other side.

