

**Kirk of St. James, Sunday, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018**

**Sermon: “Fear Factor” by Chad Bolton**

**Scriptures: Mark 4:35-41, Psalm 107:23-32, Job 38:1-11**

Growing up, my father always used to tell this story about his cousin and him when they were kids. There was this abandoned house in their rural community and it had gotten the reputation as being haunted. The man who lived in the house had died one evening while at home and since that day, myths and legends had circulated about how the house had retained some evil spirit who would come out at dark. So one night, when they were about twelve years old, my father and his cousin Gary decided to go check out this house. They waited until it was dark and then snuck out of their homes and met up on the old dirt road in front of the abandoned building. The wind was blowing, there was only a sliver of moonlight and they could barely see, as they slowly crept towards the old rickety structure. Gary, being the self-proclaimed brave one, soon found himself ahead of my dad. They got closer and closer, inching along the dark path when suddenly there was a mighty crash and one of the windows facing them shattered, spilling glass fragments all over the ground. Well, as my dad tells the story, Gary turned for the hills and ran. Fast. Never looked back. And to this very day, Gary still does not know that it was my dad who threw the rock that broke the window.

Fear is a powerful motivator. My cousin didn't really believe the house was haunted; he didn't really think something supernatural would harm him, but when he heard that mighty crash, his fear took over. This morning, in the gospel of Mark, we read a similar account.

This story of Jesus calming the sea is already well known. Perhaps even to the point that we miss the subtle nuances Mark's account contains. This is more than just a story about wind and rain; this is a story about chaos and relief and the convictions of our faith. To help us plumb the depths of meaning Mark is attempting to convey, we need to look at three prominent components of the story – the storm itself, Jesus' sleeping, and then finally, Jesus' interaction with the disciples.

First, the storm. In past times, water held unfathomable mystery for ancient peoples: it was forceful and unknowable and entirely unpredictable. For folks back then water often represented chaos and whenever chaos was breaking into human life in the ancient world, they

reminded themselves that God was still in control. The Old Testament is full of these moments which acknowledge God's command over the chaos. For example, Psalm 33 says "The Lord gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses." And Psalm 69 is basically one big cry of help to God: "Save me, God, for the waters have come up to my neck...I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me; let me be delivered from my enemies and the deep waters."

So using water is a fitting and appropriate way for Mark to communicate Jesus' mastery of chaos. But, as I mentioned earlier, this is about more than bad weather. Mark chooses to use a unique Greek word to describe the storm – *lailaps*. And not just any *lailaps*, but a great *lailaps*. What does this word mean? Well, this is also the Greek word used in Job 38:1 in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint), and it's used to describe a 'whirlwind.' So this is no ordinary storm; this isn't like being stuck out on the water when a thunder storm hits. This is more like being on a raft when Hurricane Katrina comes bearing down on you. What's interesting is that Mark intends this whirlwind to carry overtones of demonic power. How can we tell? Well, when Jesus speaks to the storm, Mark uses the same Greek verbs that he employed when Jesus cast out demons just a few short chapters ago, in Mark chapter 1. He 'rebukes' the wind and says "be silent." Rebuking and being silent – by using these terms once more, Mark is invoking the Jewish and Greco Roman mythological dimensions of storms at sea as ruled by demons, gods, and sea monsters. Mark is telling us this storm is intentionally sinister, and yet just as God had authority over the primeval chaos during creation, which we read in Job this morning, so too Jesus has authority over the malevolent forces of nature.

But before Jesus rebukes the wind and the sea exhibits a great calm, he is fast asleep. And here we come to the second critical component of the story – Jesus dozing in the boat while this evil whirlwind spreads havoc. How can Jesus sleep through this calamity? When we read this part, it feels like he is toying with our faith – after all, what kind of Lord is this who teases and tests our faith when we are so vulnerable? Or is Jesus just too tired to care? But then what kind of Lord is this who succumbs to fatigue at perilous times? But I think such interpretations miss the point of Jesus asleep.

One commentator writes, “The only adequate explanation for Jesus’ sleep is that he is utterly fearless over the prospect of dying.” Let that sink in for a moment. “Jesus is able to sleep at this exact moment because he suffers no anxiety over death. He can sleep in this tiny little boat being tossed to and fro, bombarded by waves, and starting to sink because he sleeps the sleep of a faithful Jew who entrusts his future entirely to the Lord. Jesus, son of God, sleeps neither in fatigue nor neglect nor arrogant presumption about his ability to command the whirlwind; rather, he sleeps in confidence that the existence of everyone in that boat is safely enfolded in the hands of Israel’s God, who will be true to the covenant even in death.”

So understanding this is indeed a killer storm, and understanding Jesus’ sleep in the midst of dying, we can now look at the final piece of this story – Jesus’ interaction with the disciples. After he has rebuked the whirlwind and instilled a great calm over the sea, he asks his followers two questions that form the crux of this story: “Why are you afraid? Do you not yet have faith?” Clearly, they did not; after all, when they woke Jesus up from his sleep, they cried out, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” They doubted Jesus’ care for them.

But I don’t think Jesus’ questioning is meant to be condescending or sarcastic; he’s not scolding the disciples as we might imagine, but rather he seems genuinely concerned about their inability to trust God in such critical moments. That’s the problem with fear; it leads people to turn in on themselves and on their inadequacies. It plants doubt and mistrust and overtakes the things we know to be true. And so Jesus is calling his disciples to keep their eyes fixed on him and to trust that he will not abandon them.

How do the disciples respond to Jesus’ questions? Well, ironically, Mark tells us that they are filled with great “*phobos*.” Some translators have rendered this as “awe,” but a more accurate translation is - you guessed it – fear. And great fear at that. So instead of the “great storm” that was turned into a “great calm,” becoming a sign of “great faith” for the disciples, it becomes a source of “great fear.” Sure, the disciples were frightened in the midst of their encounter with chaos, but Mark notes it is during their encounter with Jesus that they become greatly fearful. Not only was Jesus able to sleep into death, but he expected them to sleep to!

Think about that...even chaos seems calm compared to the power of Jesus. The disciples, after this harrowing escape don’t have the brain power to compute this startling

revelation. They suddenly want off this boat – “Who is this here beside us to whom chaos even bows?!” Even though they’ve just experienced the power of Christ first-hand, even with the proof before their very eyes that God is watching out for them, they still exhibit fear rather than confidence.

There used to be a reality television show called Fear Factor. In this show, teams of participants would face their greatest fears, and if they did so successfully, they would move onto the next round until eventually there was a winning team. If they could not handle their fear, they were eliminated from the competition. It was called Fear Factor because a fear factor is the extent to which a person’s fear prevents them from doing something. That is an apt summary for what unfolds in this story. In the case of the disciples, their fear trumped their faith and trust in God. Even after the chaos ceased, they were still filled with fear, they still doubted God was with them and for them. And that in turn prevented them from responding to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

I had an English professor back in university who once asked us, “When was the last time you weren’t scared, or anxious, or worried?” Can you recall when that moment was? For my professor, he was eight years old; he recalls going to bed one night, care-free, empty of fear, and the next morning when he awoke, he remembered that he had forgotten to study for a math test later that afternoon. Since then, he said, there was always something in his life to be worried about or fearful of, or nervous for.

Fear lives all around us. There is always something to fear. And most of the time those fears are very legitimate, very real. Jesus never says to us “Now, now, there’s nothing to be afraid of”, the way that maybe your parents told you when you complained about the monsters under the bed. Instead of patronizing us, Jesus says to those who follow him, “Don’t be afraid, not because there are no fearful things, but because you are not alone.” That’s a subtle difference but an important one. And it’s the gospel’s truth. The deep truth that only faith in the God who raised Jesus from the grave can teach: that even though there are real and fearsome things in the chaos, they need not paralyze us; they need not have dominion over us; they need not own us, because we are not alone in the boat. Today and every day, may we sleep with confidence in our faith. Amen.