

**“Why Are You Afraid?”**  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**June 17, 2018**

**First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 23 (The Message)**

<sup>1-3</sup> God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.

<sup>4</sup> Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.

<sup>5</sup> You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.

<sup>6</sup> Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

**Second Scripture Lesson: Mark 4:35-41**

<sup>35</sup>On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” <sup>36</sup>And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. <sup>37</sup>A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. <sup>38</sup>But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” <sup>39</sup>He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. <sup>40</sup>He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” <sup>41</sup>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?”



**Sermon: *Why Are You Afraid?***

“Why are you afraid” may seem like a dumb question, given the circumstances. Thirteen large men in a small boat, out in the middle of a wide lake during a great storm. Fear would seem to be a natural response. When Jesus asks the disciples “Why are you afraid?” an appropriate answer might have been “Why are you not?”

But notice that Jesus did not tell the disciples there is nothing for them to fear. He does not scoff at their fear of storms. He knows that storms are dangerous and scary. Especially when your boat is small and the lake is wide.

Jesus points out here, that in their panic, the disciples are giving in to their fear. They are letting it distract them and get the best of them. The heart of the question is not, “Why are you afraid *of this storm?*”. It's “Why are you afraid?”. Why is it that your response to this storm is defined by your fear and not your faith?” And with all the storms we face in life, both literal and metaphorical, that is a question that we face sometimes, too.

You see fear is natural and to a degree, healthy. It's fear that keeps us from doing dangerous things, like playing with fire or jumping the fence to go hug the lions at the zoo. Fear can also inspire us. It can heighten our awareness. It can motivate us to take action.

But fear can also be debilitating. Sometimes the things we fear can seem especially threatening: strangers, intruders, all manner of things that go bump in the night, but also illness and injury, unemployment, bankruptcy, something bad happening to our children; we want to prevent those kinds of things; to avoid them at all costs. And when the fear is strong enough, our instinct toward self-preservation can take over.

But in this short story in Mark, we learn two things:

1. When we are afraid, we have to remember that God is in control and that God is stronger than the things we fear most. In Romans 8 Paul makes that point: "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>1</sup>

In Christ Jesus, we see that God is more powerful than the things we fear most in the world, even death.

2. But the second thing we learn here is that God's way is still always the best way, even when we're frightened. When we're afraid, it is natural to want to try *anything* to relieve that fear; to protect us from the object of our fear. But Jesus taught that the greatest law is not the law of self-preservation. The greatest law is that you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself.

That doesn't mean we must always put ourselves in harm's way, take unnecessary risks, and disregard our own interests. But it does mean that we can't ignore Christ's command to love and serve God by loving and serving God's people, even in the interest of self-preservation.

So, the second thing we learn here is that our responses to fearsome things should always be rooted in love, not fear.

I understand. The world can be a scary place sometimes. There are lots of things in the world of which to be afraid. Storms are still as scary today as they were back then. Mary Gause and Bob Glaeser and Crystal Hambrock and the youth group are on their way to Texas at this very moment to spend the week helping people recover from a very fearsome storm. And every time those sirens go off and I have to shuffle the boys down into the basement to wait out a tornado warning, I feel scared.

I don't need to list off all the threats in this world that keep us awake at night. You know them. And each of us probably has a few things on our list that others don't. But fear, however rational, cannot be the driving force in our lives. We can't live in fear. Because if we do, we make decisions out of fear, instead of love. We begin to value our own safety and well-being at the expense of the safety and well-being of others.

We store-up more than enough for the future, for ourselves, and our families, while accepting that others don't have enough for today. We cross the street rather than walk by a person who looks different. We ignore those in need out of concern for being taken advantage of. But maybe most troubling, when fear

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:38-39, NRSV

takes hold, we begin to tolerate actions and behavior that should be intolerable, in the name of safety, and comfort, and self-preservation.

I remember during orientation one semester when I was in Seminary, the head of campus security addressed the student body. At one point he gestured over towards the public housing project that was located just beyond the southern edge of our campus and said that we would be able to sleep easy at night, because he and his officers were going to make sure the crime and the violence stayed “over there where it belongs.”

But my good friend Molly Gee raised her hand and said, “With all due respect, it doesn’t belong ‘over there’ either.”

This nation is still one of the most powerful in the world, if not the most powerful, but we still seem to act out of fear. And while we have good reason to be scared sometimes, we have absolutely no excuse for letting our fear be what dictates our actions and defines our responses. We call ourselves a “Christian nation,” but too often we act out of fear rather than faith.

For a while now we’ve been so afraid of terrorists that we’ll allow innocent men, women, and children in places like Afghanistan and Iraq to suffer the ravages of war so that our streets and our citizens will be safer, and over the last two years we’ve begun turning away whole communities of immigrants who are themselves fleeing violence and poverty in their own countries in the name of national defense.

And in a more recent development, it seems that we are now so worried about the security of our southern border that we are willing to allow children to be separated from their families.

We’re afraid of a lot of things: There are too many guns. There are not enough guns. Taxes are too high. Taxes aren’t high enough. There’s too much violence, too many criminals, too many drugs. Arctic ice packs are getting smaller while sea levels are rising. And each of these truly frightening things is a political issue on which reaching consensus is almost impossible because we’re also afraid that working together might mean less power and influence for “our side” and more for “theirs.”

We call ourselves a “Christian nation” and our money even says, “In God We Trust,” but I’m not convinced that it’s God we’ve really put our trust in. Wealth, power, guns, prestige, influence; every day I see evidence that we’re putting our trust in a lot of things besides God. But still, in the midst of our fear, Jesus says to us “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

Last week, Michael Ludwig talked to us about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the portrayal of God as our Shepherd who provides our needs and protects us in dangerous circumstances. Even when we walk in the midst of danger, God is with us. Even when we are in the presence of those who would do us harm, God provides for us and sets a meal before us. Our cups overflow. We have enough. God is enough.

But too often we act as though that were not true. Or as if we were oblivious to the truth of God’s grace, mercy, and steadfast love.

For the disciples in the boat, there’s a reason they let their fear overwhelm them. Yes, storms *are* frightening, but they are travelling with Jesus, surely that should bring some comfort. If they know they are travelling with the Son of God, they should have a great deal of confidence ... except maybe that’s the problem. Maybe they *don’t* really know that. Maybe they *don’t* really understand *who* Jesus is.

They've heard it ... in the words of prophets, in the whispers of witnesses who have seen and experienced his miraculous healing power ... but have they ever really come to believe that this man, the teacher they have committed to following, is really who he says he is. Their question in the boat "Who is this then that even the winds and the sea obey?" suggests that they don't.

You see, there's a difference between knowing *about* someone and *truly knowing* them.

When we were still serving at Fort Hill Church in Clemson, South Carolina, I had another pastor call me once and ask me to write a recommendation for one of her students who was applying for a summer internship. He needed a reference from his campus pastor and since he was Presbyterian, and I was the Presbyterian campus minister, I was the logical candidate.

Except that I had never met this young man before. When I explained that this would make writing his reference much more than difficult, she suggested that we could meet for coffee or lunch, visit for a couple of hours, and then I would be able to write his reference.

Now, as many of you know, I am a huge fan of lunch. I eat it almost every day. But that day I took a pass. I rejected the notion that after one hour of conversation, I could know him well enough to speak intelligently or with any depth, about who he was. You see, in that short time I could learn facts *about* him, but it would be impossible to really *know* him.

The disciples know a lot of things *about* Jesus, but in this story, they show that they don't really *know* Jesus. If they did, they would trust him. Yes, the storm would still be frightening. But they would have turned to Jesus first. They would have put their trust in him to see them safely through that danger (one way or another). And that speaks to the power and the peace of really knowing Jesus.

There are a lot of fearsome things in the world. And it can be easy to get overwhelmed by them all. But when we know Jesus, we understand that in Him we find the embodiment of all that God is. When Jesus is loving and merciful we understand that God is loving and merciful. When we see Jesus' desire that we have abundant life, we know that God desires for us abundant life. When we see Jesus, we see God. And in God we truly can put our faith that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

But it's hard to trust someone we do not know that well. So that is why we study our Bibles and read from great religious thinkers and writers like Shirlie Guthrie and Leslie Weatherhead and Kathleen Norris. That's why we participate in the life of the church and invest ourselves in the worship, fellowship, and mission of the church. And most importantly, that's why we set aside time to talk with God each day and then to listen for God's answers. It's why we look for God to be active in the world around us and listen for God's voice as we go about our daily living, seeking God's will, expecting to receive God's guidance.

Knowing *about* God is as simple as opening a book. But the task of the disciple (like us!) is to know God intimately and to put our trust in God to guide us, to seek God's will, and to always respond out of love and not fear, even in the face of fearful things.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.