

Proper 14 Gen 37; Rom 10; Mt 14:22-33

Rev. Dr. Scot Sherman • Grace Cathedral • 8/8/20

The other night my wife and I watched the musical Anni-- (which seemed right for 'Fogust' in SF "*The Sun'll come out ...in October!*") Something to lift our spirits. I learned that it's based on a comic strip *Little Orphan Annie*, begun back in the 20s, written by Harold Gray, a right-wing populist believed poor should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, loathed FDR and the new deal. But when Thomas Mehan adapted it for Broadway in 1970s, he subverted Gray's politics. Anni is compassionate toward the homeless, and she's rescued from the murderous orphanage director by none other than FDR himself! Musical ends with a rousing number, "*we'll have a new deal for Christmas!*" We ended the day, toes tapping, reminding each other: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself!"

Well, that didn't last long; we were back to our doomscrolling ways by bedtime, which is why I so need to hear today's gospel, as someone still learning to live in faith, not fear.

Now, not all fear is bad. Chanequa Walker Barnes is a public theologian and clinical psychologist, just published an essay entitled “The Fear God Gives Us”, distinguishes healthy vs unhealthy fear:

“Unhealthy fear is fear that is afraid of itself, fear that has morphed into anxiety, will even refuse to adapt to clear and present danger and will belittle and attack those who do.”

Think of the irrational and defiant resistance we’re seeing to wearing face masks. She contrasts this with healthy fear, “function of God-given limbic system of the brain, capable of 1500 different biochemical responses to threat! From dilating the pupils, decreasing the sense of pain, even producing more blood clotting platelets in case of injury.” IOW, fear triggers the limbic system, makes you stronger, faster, more focused. What may have evolved to save us from saber tooth tigers, now kicks in when we face stressors like saber toothed economic instability, lack of medical coverage, saber toothed racism, raging wildfires, or a once in a century health crisis storm whose waves are battering the entire world.

It is REASONABLE to be afraid in this world! We just marked the 75th anniversary of nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki this week; the same week former secretary of defense William Perry writes in a new book, "*we stand today in greater danger of nuclear catastrophe than we faced during the cold war.*" Fear is not just REASONABLE, if I weren't afraid of what's happening in the world right now, honestly, I'd look into getting a CAT scan.

So what are FDR and Jesus going on about? ***What is bad fear?*** The disciples are terrified of a storm, incidentally, their 2nd traumatic boating incident; in the 1st, recorded in Mt 8, there's a storm and Jesus is ***asleep***; their fear isn't just for the storm; the fear is that he doesn't ***care*** that they're going to perish. This time, he sends them away while he deals with the crowd he's just fed; they find themselves adrift in a storm. He put them there! Now he's nowhere to be found. They are abandoned and afraid. Then, he comes to them, across the water, saying "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*" Take courage because "it is I" the Greek phrase [*ego eimi*] the words used to translate the divine name revealed to Moses, "I am." I am! There's a resonance here that identifies Jesus as the son of God, the one performing and

revealing the will of God. Then he tells them not to be afraid, and calms the storm.

We get this same story in Mk and Lk, but only here do we get this detail about Peter's walk. The late Swiss theologian, Ulrich Luz, said that Peter is the "*archetypal disciple*"—he's us, his stumbles are a picture of all our stumbles—the 1st to believe Jesus is the Messiah, he gets the meaning so wrong that he's rebuked with a "get thee behind me Satan"; called to watch and pray with Jesus at his darkest hour, he falls asleep; bragging that he will never deny Jesus, he hits a triple denial before the cock crows. And here, he steps out in faith, but he gets spooked by the wind and sinks, until Jesus takes him by the hand.

Notice Jesus' question to Peter. (Jesus is like a good spiritual director, or therapist—just when you want them to explain something they ask you a great question...it's so exasperating). "***You of little faith, why did you doubt?***" He uses a word there than can also be translated "hesitate" the kind of personal confusion that prevents action or commitment. This is bad fear—incapacitating fear under which he sinks, under which ***we sink***, because we don't believe God is present and able to save.

It is a holy moment, not only for Peter for all of them. When Jesus calmed the storm in the 1st story, they ask “*who is this?*” This time, they worship and confess “*Truly you are the son of God.*” Matthew is giving us this question as well.

Are you flooded by fear, and is it causing you to doubt God’s love? To hesitate to love? Are you cultivating a mindset of scarcity and anxiety, or of abundance and trust?

Do you see how Jesus dispels the illusion of abandonment that feeds the neurosis—he moves towards Peter, towards us with God’s gracious and loving presence. He invites them into a spirituality that learns to move through fear into the security of God’s loving, mothering arms.

That’s the wisdom that enables Joseph to persevere thru enslavement, resist cynicism and bitterness, forgive his brothers and see God’s purposes for justice at work; it’s the faith that enabled Paul to see past imprisonment, death threats, and rejection to believe that God’s faithfulness was good news for all people.

It's what gives me courage. Grace Cathedral has been my sponsor for ordination (for which I am incredibly grateful). I've entered the transitional diaconate in a season when churches can't gather physically, in a time where there were already deep, troubling questions about the future of the church. I don't have all the answers! But, thanks to this gospel, I know the way forward from little faith, doubt, and fear: it is to fix our eyes on one who is ever present, ever moving towards us in love, saying, "*Courage, I'm here, Do not be afraid.*" Amen.