

“Filled with a Great Fear”

Goal: That the hearers believe more firmly that the transcendent God is Lord of their lives.

Text: Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. I would like you all to take a moment and remember the last time you were really afraid. Try to remember the sights, the sounds, the people, the whole situation.

Now I am betting that a few of you were probably scared by a movie you recently saw. Maybe you watched a classic like Psycho or Poltergeist. Not long ago I remember that The Blair Witch Project scared half of America silly and just recently The Omen was released into theaters. Some of you may have been scared by something a bit more adventurous. Maybe you were riding a roller coaster at Six Flags or maybe you did something really daring like skydiving. I know several people who have been literally scared to tears while white water rafting in Colorado. But maybe you aren't the type of person who likes to pay good money to be scared. Maybe the last time you were frightened was when you or someone you love realized just how frail we really are as human beings. Maybe you are one of our youth who were attacked by a swarm of bees in Texas, or maybe like Pastor Kriete you were recently in a horrendous car accident, or maybe you are one of the many people we pray for each week who are facing cancer. Somehow, some way you have had to face Fear; and you certainly aren't alone. Fear is a common emotion that we all have to deal with at some point in time.

Now I bring this up because our Gospel lesson today mentions that the disciples were very afraid. In fact, if you read closely they were frightened twice in the short span of just seven verses. As we read, the disciples and Christ are in a boat crossing a lake, probably the Sea of Galilee, and suddenly a huge storm erupts. The wind begins to toss the boat around and the waves increase in size and intensity; and in short order, the boat begins to take on a lot of water.

Now surprisingly, Jesus is able to sleep through all of this commotion and when the disciples finally get to the point that they truly believe they are about to die, they wake Jesus up and ask him if he even cares. Now Jesus, for his part, gets up, still half asleep and groggy from a long day of teaching in the hot sun, and with absolute authority, like that of a parent, he tells the storm to be still...and it all stops. Suddenly everything becomes eerily quiet. He then turns to the disciples and asks them point blank “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” Now the fear Christ is talking about is the first fear of this passage. The disciples, many of whom were expert fishermen – they were born and raised and made their living on this very lake – were afraid that the storm would swamp the boat and drown them all; and I am sure all of you can sympathize with them. You may not be an expert fisherman, but whether it is a tsunami in the Pacific or a hurricane in the Gulf or even tornados in our own backyard; we can all appreciate the awesome, and at time devastating, power of nature; but this isn’t the disciples’ only fear. In fact, it wasn’t even their greatest fear. The text continues and immediately after Jesus rebukes the disciples the text says “And they were terrified.” And they said to each other “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” This fear was a fear from being in the presence of Christ. The storm had gotten their attention; but it was the awesome power of the Lord that chilled them to the bone.

Now my bet is that when you were trying to recall the last time you were afraid, you didn’t think of being filled with a fear of the Lord. You see that idea doesn’t seem to be a quality that our society or even our church really appreciates much anymore. Now I am not saying that we should come together on Sunday mornings and physically tremble before the cross. I am also not suggesting that as sinners before a righteous God we should be scared of being squashed like a bug; and yet the Scriptures clearly proclaim that a fear of the Lord is one of the highest values a

believer can have. David writes in Psalm 34 states “Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.” Solomon writes in the Proverbs that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. A healthy fear of the Lord is exalted by the patriarchs of the Old Testament as far back as Moses and down through the generations to Isaiah and Jeremiah; and then in the New Testament our Jesus teaches us in the Gospel of Luke “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” Only God, our Lord, has the power to throw you into Hell. So from Moses clear down to Christ we are told to fear the Lord.

So as I examined this text, I pondered the word “fear” in all of its various uses and I discovered three different aspects that combine to make up any genuine fear. My hope and prayer for us this morning is that by examining all three aspects we will better understand how to create and maintain a healthy fear of the Lord. The first requirement for any fear is that there has to be someone or something above us who is more powerful – something that has the ability to drastically affect our lives. The disciples certainly knew this when they were in the boat. First they were filled with a fear of the storm which had the power to swamp the boat and drown them all. And their second fear was that of Christ who controlled the storm and proved that he held their very lives in the palm of his hand. Both were greater and more powerful than any of the disciples, individually or combined. And this isn’t something that you and I generally have a hard time with. No one is going to say that God is weaker than we are or below us in majesty, power or glory. The very fact that we have gathered here to worship our God is testimony to this fact.

The second requirement for any genuine fear is that whatever is causing the fear must be beyond our control. Now this is where I believe the heart of the issue for Christians really lies. Although we will all acknowledge that God is higher and more powerful than we are, we still like to feel as though we are in control; so we focus primarily upon the gentle aspects of God, His great mercy and abundant love. We sing songs like “I am Jesus Little Lamb” and “Jesus Loves Me This I Know.” In our mind we picture God as a gentle father – Abba, daddy, Jesus as an innocent little baby and the Holy Spirit as a beautiful dove descending out of heaven. All of these images make us feel good. They are comforting and non-threatening – and they are all genuinely true. They are taken straight from Scripture.

But far too often we fail to balance this picture with the other side of our God who is righteous judge; a God full of majesty and glory who lives in unapproachable light. The Old Testament says that any man who looks upon his face would die in an instant and the holy angels who attend to his royal throne cover their faces while singing Holy, Holy, Holy. On top of this, our God is a fierce warrior who in his righteous anger slaughters entire societies in the blink of an eye. In his righteous anger he destroyed the great cities of Sodom and Gomorrah with a hail storm of fire and brimstone and burning sulfur. When he decided to lead his people out of Egypt, he first hardened Pharaoh’s heart and then he slaughtered every first born man and beast. And when he lead Israel into the Promised Land, he fought for the Israelites and killed every man, woman and child. This is not a God we can control. He is not our gentle, white bearded grandfather or a charming innocent child. When we worship, the Lord’s Prayer and Nicene Creeds are not incantations that we chant so that God will do our bidding. We can not put him away when things are going well and pull him out like some good luck charm when we need Him most. Our God won’t be limited like that. In fact, our God won’t be controlled at all.

But what is truly amazing is that although the Almighty God is fierce, majestic and beyond our control, that is exactly what we needed. Although a wild and untamed God scares all of us to the bone, just like it did the disciples, only a God beyond our control could ever save us from our sins. You see, if we could control Yahweh, the Great I Am, if we could command him like a butler or charm him like our grandfather, then we could have saved ourselves. But we can't save ourselves. Who among us has the power to lift ourselves out of the quicksand of sin and death? Only someone who is greater, someone who is more powerful and beyond our control has the ability lift us out of this cesspool of sin and we are completely at his mercy. But what truly amazes me is that this uncontrollable God, of his own free choice, decided that he wanted to live with us for eternity. Our God, without being coerced, prodded or unduly influenced, voluntarily sacrificed himself to save you and me from eternal death. Just as wild and untamed is his anger and wrath; so is his uncontrollable love for each and every one of us.

I mentioned that there are three requirements for all genuine fear. The first is that someone or something is greater and more powerful than you are. The second is that you can't control that person or event. The third and final aspect of fear is that it requires our full and undivided attention. When you are staring at the oncoming tornado or in the middle of a horrendous car accident, it envelopes your every thought. Nothing else that is able to divert your attention or focus; and God is the same way. He demands our full and complete attention at all times. He wants to be the first thing we think about when we wake up and the driving force behind everything we do throughout the day. He is the Alpha and the Omega of not only creation but also the life of every Christian.

These three aspects of fear combined and that is what the disciples saw that night on the Sea of Galilee. They had heard the incredible teachings of this rabbi and had even seen some of

his miracles that left them awed and bewildered. But up until this night, Jesus was just another teacher that they could take or leave at will. But on this night, Jesus took that option away. The disciples were terrified because now, here was Jesus above them in power, beyond their control, and by his very presence he was demanding their complete attention; and that same Jesus Christ comes for you today – beyond your control, majestic and glorious, wild and untamed, full of love and mercy. And for this we should fear, love and trust in God above all things. Amen.

Now may the peace which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.