

“God, Don’t You Care?”
Preached by Casey Bushman, Licensed Lay Preacher
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost — June 20, 2021

When is the last time you were truly terrified?

I’m not talking about being a little anxious, worried...surprised or caught off guard by something — I’m talking about the kind of fear that grips your whole body. When is the last time you experienced absolute terror?

For me it was probably a few weeks ago. My youngest daughter wandered off, we were playing in the backyard, realized we had left the gate open to the front, she’s 3 years old and loves to wander away when we’re not paying attention. In that moment, as every parent knows, the knees go weak and the adrenaline shoots through your body... you’re running every, back and forth, trying by process of elimination to figure out where she is and where she is not — so hard to be rational because simultaneously your mind is being assaulted by the absolute worst case scenarios... In this case we didn’t have to search much longer than 15, 20 seconds. It felt much longer. We found her. She was safe and everything. She had wandered up the sidewalk about 3 or 4 houses down. But true terror certainly gripped us for those few seconds.

It’s a feeling that sticks with you. It’s a feeling I certainly don’t wish upon anyone. But, as we see in today’s gospel reading, it’s a place where God can meet us. It’s a place in our heart where we can encounter God in a unique way.

This story may be familiar to you, in part because it shows up in multiple gospel accounts. It’s a terrifying story. I hope none of you have had the misfortune of being in this circumstance — out on the water in the middle of a storm. I’m also glad this reading didn’t come up on the Sunday we’re due to send the men’s group out on their fishing trip. :) But if you look closely, there are actually three distinct places — three moments — where terror is experienced by the disciples. And I think each one has something to see to us, here today.

The first is at the very beginning — it’s the initial fear of the storm. The wind was kicking up, and the waters were growing rougher. These fishermen had enough experience on the water to know what was coming. They were not new to this territory or this way of traveling. It is widely known that storms would commonly stir up without warning on the Sea of Galilee. Everyone knew what was about to happen.

This is the fear of suffering — the fear that something *bad* is about to happen to me, and it’s beyond my control. This is the fear that my daughter is wandering out into the street or that the test results will come back showing growth in the cancer or that the paper you turned in on Friday will not be enough to lift you to a passing grade. We’re all very familiar with this type of fear. It unfortunately dominates much of our lives.

At the end of the story, however, we observe a different kind of fear. Jesus has just rebuked the wind and the waves — “peace, be still” — returning the lively sea to its original calm. And amidst the eery silence, waters gently lapping the side of the boat, causing it to rock every so slightly — a different kind of terror grips the disciples.

The NRSV actually says the disciples “were filled with great awe,” which is a generous translation, and an attempt to smooth over some of the differences between the scriptural accounts of this episode. The word Mark chooses is *phobeomai*; notice the similarity to our English word *phobia*. It’s most common meaning is “to be afraid.” In contrast, when Matthew relates this very same story in his gospel he uses a completely different word, telling us the disciples “were amazed.” Luke, perhaps holding Mark’s manuscript in one hand and Matthew’s in the other, decides to split the difference: he says the disciples were “both amazed and afraid.” :)

Whatever you want to make of all that, whatever you want to call it, Mark is telling us that there was clearly an element of fear in the disciples’ response. And what kind of fear was it? Did they realize right then and there that they were in the presence of the Son of God, and as such were struck with awe and reverence? Or were they just thinking exactly what they said: “Who is this guy?” Were they basically just “freaked out,” as it were? I suspect it’s more of the latter. This is the fear of the unexplained, the fear that reminds us we don’t have all the answers. It’s the fear of the unknown — and perhaps the unknowable. I think we’ve all experienced this fear as well, at some level. It is also part of what it means to be human.

The third instance of fear is actually sandwiched between the first two, right at the heart of the story. At the peak moment of tension in this developing crisis, the disciples rush down below deck to wake Jesus, who has been comfortably asleep this entire time. And what do they say to him after waking him up? “Teacher, *do you not care....?*” ... “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ...

Here we find another interesting divergence in Mark’s account of this story. Matthew and Luke’s versions basically have the disciples here saying something like: “Wake up and rescue us! We’re going to drown!” A simple, urgent plea for help. What you might expect given the circumstances. But what does Mark’s account have the disciples saying? “Teacher, don’t you care...?” ... Do you hear the difference? Wow! Those are really biting words, aren’t they?! There is some attitude in those words. There is some anger. And at the heart of it, I think, there is fear.

This is a fear unlike what we see at the beginning and at the end of the story. This is a unique type of terror. It is the fear that we have been abandoned. It’s the fear that the One who’s supposed to love us and care for us doesn’t actually love us or care for us. It’s the fear that when the time of trouble comes, the truth will come out — no one actually cares about our pain. No one’s even paying attention.

This is perhaps the darkest and loneliest of all fears. And **this**, I believe, is what Jesus rebukes in the disciples, when he calls them out for their lack of faith — it’s not their

fear of the storm that bothers him; what could be more human than that? It is their doubting of God's love and care in Christ. *This* is what shows how much room they have to grow in their faith. It is their questioning of God's heart, God's faithfulness, of everything God came to demonstrate in Christ. It is their stubbornly-held belief in a *lesser god* — simply a lesser god — a petty god, a lazy god, a selfish god. It is a belief that makes saving faith *impossible*, because it can never grant the believer *true freedom*.

You know, sailors caught in storms have been calling on various gods to rescue them for literally thousands of years? Thousands of years. Think about it for a second. Countless people, lifting up countless prayers of desperation. Some of them lived; some of them surely died. To be a Christian is not to believe that the ones who made it, God loved, and the ones who didn't make it, God didn't care about. To be a Christian is to believe that God in Christ has forged a faithful love that no storm can destroy, no waters can sink, ... no cancer can ravage, no thief can steal. And whenever someone, anyone, comes to know this kind of love, for that person eternal life has already begun.

This is our faith.

Amen.