

Fear! Fear is a vital response to physical and emotional danger. And, if we didn't feel it, we couldn't protect ourselves from legitimate threats. But often we fear situations that are far from life-or-death, and thus hang back for no good reason. Sometimes, fear can actually be paralyzing and it can keep us from living into the fullness of life, living into life that truly matters. Yet, exposing ourselves to our personal demons by facing our fears is the best way to move through them and past them. In today's gospel, we hear a story that not only addresses the fear that can literally overpower us, but we also hear a story of the even greater power of promise, telling us of a loving presence that will never let us go.

At last, Jesus has finally been able to send the crowds away. He has convinced his disciples to get in a boat and cross the lake ahead of him. Finally, he has found time to retreat and spend some time in prayer. As we look at today's gospel reading, Jesus is not a superhero who has retreated to his bat cave. He is not a ghost out to haunt the already terrified. He is a man. Fully God, fully human. He is the Son of God, though those around him don't yet recognize him. His ship of faith is being battered by the rejection of his hometown folks and the beheading of his cousin John the

Baptist by Herod. He knows his time is coming. Crowds of needy people have been constantly pressing in on him. And, he needs some time alone.

Jesus is praying, perhaps lifting up each of his fears and struggles to God and exchanging them for faith, allowing the comfort and healing and power of God to fill his inner life, his heart, mind, emotions, and will. After all, this is what the Jewish scriptures tell us to do, to surrender all our lesser fears to our fear of the Lord, which means our **reverence** for God, for who God is and what God can do. And, as Jesus then looks up and squints at the horizon he sees the disciples' little boat bobbing side to side, back and forth, up and down.

The disciples have spent nearly the whole night struggling to get across that blasted lake before Jesus shows up near daybreak. The Sea of Galilee is not a massive body of water, never more than seven miles across when traveling east-west. Yet, they've not been able to traverse it, for the storm has "battered" or "thrashed" their boat. And, as for the churning sea? In their worldview, it represents chaos and danger. Then, they think they see a ghost. Fear erupts because they anticipate how the story will probably end. All night they have been threatened by the prospect that this chaos might devour them. They saw themselves as disciples left to die at the mercy of more powerful forces.

Then, they realize this seeming “ghost” is Jesus, striding over the watery chaos. And, astoundingly, Peter wants to step out there on that water. Peter steps out of the boat and enters the tumult. And, Peter flounders. He flounders because he grows afraid. Quite frankly, that fear is justified. The storm is still powerfully raging and it is so intense it could sink the boat, let alone drown a single person. He has perfectly good reason to be afraid.

And, so do we. There are multiple reasons each one of us might face fear. Maybe you fear loneliness after loss. Or, fear losing stability as you face a fragile relationship. Or, fear aging and all the issues that come with growing old. Or, maybe fear the return of an illness, or the progression of present illness. Or, maybe you fear for your kids and what they are experiencing or will experience. Or, you fear facing a new chapter in life, or making a major life-changing decision. Or, you fear the future of our congregation, or the direction of our country, or global security.... You name it! There are multiple situations and reasons in our individual, congregational and communal lives that make us afraid. And that fear can be paralyzing, debilitating, and make it difficult for us to move forward or even have any sense of confidence. In fact, as professor David Lose says,

“Fear is one of the primary things that robs the children of God of the abundant life God intends for us.”

Well, in response to Peter’s fear, Jesus doesn’t simply urge Peter to buck up, be a man, be courageous, let go of his fear and focus on him. Instead, when Peter begins to sink, Jesus literally *catches* him! He grabs hold of Peter! Jesus grabs him and saves him from drowning. He grabs him and restores him to his vocation as a disciple. And, guess what? He does the same with us. Jesus will not, he absolutely will never, let us go. Jesus is **never** going to give up on us, no matter what we do! The God we know is truly THE LOVE THAT WILL NEVER LET US GO! In the depth of our fear, Jesus grabs us, holds on to us when we falter and restores us to where we can again be of service to him.

Today’s gospel, good news word to us is a message that is not only about our fear. It is a message that is the heart of the gospel message. It is the gospel good news of grace which proclaims that God will never give up on us, that God is **with** us and **for** us, that God – in the end – will do what we cannot do for ourselves and save us. This is a message that enables us to cope with life and with our fear because it is a message that enables us to transcend that fear. We may not be able to defeat it, but we can face it, stand in the swirling disorder and chaos, and do what needs to

be done even when we are afraid. And, quite frankly, this is the nature of what it means to live out an active life of faith, to be willing to throw oneself into a disorderly world and expect to encounter Jesus there.

I love what William Willimon says about this passage. He writes:

If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea and [discover] his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.

Getting out of the boat with Jesus and going to places where Jesus goes is the most risky, most exciting, and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest, life that truly matters, life that is abundant. Today's gospel reading invites us to trust God's promises and do just that.