

Fear Not

Today's gospel invites each of us, if we will buy it, to join St. Peter as he stepped out of the boat and onto the chaotic waters. As long as he keeps his focus on Jesus, short-fused Peter, questioning Peter, loyal Peter, walks on that water.

And today, Jesus calls on each of us to get out of the boat, and, focusing on him, in all of our own ornery, questioning, but loyal selves, to walk on that water too.

Why am I talking about boats and water today? Because "do not worry about your life" is another way of saying, "step out of the boat, walk on the water."

At first glance, it's totally crazy.

We cannot NOT worry about our life!

Everyone knows we can't walk on water.

Except, that as followers of Jesus, we can.

The first place Jesus takes us to today is to ask: "To whom are you loyal?" That is the first question.

The answer to that question determines the life we choose: whether we help or decline to help; who we look out for; whom do we follow?

To whom are you loyal?

In America, we try hard to have it both ways. On every dollar bill are the words: "In God we trust."

The irony, for a Christian, is almost unbearable.

Jesus makes it clear we cannot have it both ways:

"You cannot serve God and wealth."

But, by golly, so many want so much to have it both ways!

So to try to have it both ways, we too often have turned the God of Jesus Christ into a national god, a god with a small "g"; a god who sports red, white and blue, a god who blesses our wars, a god who blesses our way of life.

If you listen to certain radio or TV programs, you will hear all about this god.

But make no mistake, that god is an idol. That god is false. That god has no relationship to the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the true God.

And we know this because the life and work of Jesus directly contradicts the god of the flag, the god of money, the god of material success.

The god of the flag, the god of capitalism, the god of “our way of life” is based on fear, it is based on anxiety, it is based on worry. Fear, anxiety and worry are used quite intentionally to motivate people to work (or you will starve), to consume (so you can keep up with the neighbors), to be defensive when meeting the stranger (as with immigrants and others who are different).

Fear, anxiety and worry excuse trillions of dollars spent on wars and weapons of war. Fear, anxiety and worry drive people to extreme political positions where compromise seems hopeless and impasse and blame the only result.

Fear, anxiety and worry keep us isolated from one another, distrustful of one another, separated from one another.

Into this reality, a reality as old as humanity, God comes.

The oldest and most frequent commandment from God to human beings, the one God insists upon over and over; the command given to Moses when he came upon the burning bush; the command Gabriel gave to Mary as he explained the odd things that were about to happen to her; the command Jesus gave to the apostles when he was transfigured; when he appeared to them after he was raised; the command of God to humanity is this:

“Fear not!”

And oh the power we experience, in our individual and communal lives, when we obey that command! Imagine, and then try to live, for just one hour a day, a life with no fear.

For an hour a day, practice:

No fear of rejection, no fear of the stranger, no fear of hunger, no fear of loss, no fear of change and no fear even of death.

In that one hour, you can walk on water!

Faith in the Living God is the cure for fear.

To the extent we live in fear, we are worshipping a false god, a god of country or economic system; a god the Bible calls the “powers and principalities” of this world.

In them is only fear. But faith in the Living God chases out all fear.

“Fear imprisons; faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable; and most of all, fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God.” H. Fosdick.

Faith that drives out fear explains the joy with which Jesus lives his life. He loves a good party. He showers forgiveness on the worst of people, without even being asked for it!

He is extravagant with seeds and pearls and loaves and fish and wine and prodigal sons and daughters. Jesus spends a lot of time smiling with the smile that comes from a life lived in the freedom of God. A smile he invites you and I to wear as well.

None of this is to say that life won't be hard at times. At our Wednesday healing service, we had the same gospel lesson as today, but a different part of Paul's letter introduced the gospel on Wednesday.

St. Paul's letter the other day recalls his hardships: the countless beatings, of being set adrift at sea, jailed, betrayed by false friends, his hunger and thirst.

Loss, death, disappointment, betrayal; none of that is new to Paul, and for you and I, we are most of us well acquainted with it all.

These things will come, as Jesus well knows. Yet even in the face of all of this is God's steadfast and eternal command to Paul, to Mary, to you, to me: “Fear not!”

Can we, after all, add an hour to our span of life?

Today's gospel lesson is, in a sense, the entire gospel in a nutshell.

To live one day at a time, carrying out whatever task is placed before us; trusting in the good God of creation that no matter what winds will blow, no matter the difficulties or persecutions or trouble that may come, that through it all we may be still, knowing that God is God, and therefore, all will be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.

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