

Step with me again, if you will, on board the ship Jonah took in his voyage away from the presence of God. If you recall, doing so means that we step right in the middle of a storm—a storm so furious that even the weathered mariners cried out in fear.

Have you ever been in a storm at sea? Have you ever been totally out of sight of any land whatsoever with nothing between you and the raging deep other than a small, seemingly terribly vulnerable boat? I have never been at sea in a storm, but I do recall several occasions in the Puget Sound in our son's small sailing boat when I seriously wondered if we would be counted among the ranks of those lost in those waters, never to be seen again. On our return home after a visit with Keith, Larry enjoyed telling people that our son's idea of a good time was a near death experience. The threat in such occasions is very real and fear is an appropriate response.

Certain that their ship was about to break into a thousand pieces, the mariners guiding Jonah's boat did what any self respecting sailor of the day would have done. They began looking for a culprit. They cast lots to determine the identity of the guilty party who had brought this evil upon them. When the lots pointed to Jonah, they began to interrogate him. "What is this you have done! What shall we do with you?" Unaided by any scientific interpretation of weather patterns, the mariners acknowledged the only source for a storm that they knew: the gods. They cried out first to their gods and then to Jonah's god. To their credit, they did not rush to action. Even upon learning of Jonah's guilt, they continued rowing against the wind, seeking to make land. They wrestled with their decision and prayed to God, "Please, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood." Finally, with all of their own resources exhausted, they followed Jonah's counsel and threw him overboard; and the storm ceased.

Fear is an inescapable part of life. We know fear from the moment we are born. Picture the tiny newborn flailing her arms, seeking the secure embrace of her mother's womb when she is thrust into the wideness of open space. Recall the startle response when she hears a sudden noise. Our daughter shared with us an incident that happened shortly before Nathan's birth when he jumped in her womb when his dad slammed the back door of the van. Fear emerges with us at birth and probably even enters us before birth, making even more tragic the situation of an infant born into a home of abuse. Studies have indicated that at birth an infant recognizes his mother's voice and even the music of her favorite television shows. What sad implications that has for the infant who has heard his father's screams and his mother's cries before birth. And how important that makes the preventive work of Healthy Start and the safe refuge of good shelters for mothers and children fleeing violence.

What do you fear? Sickness? Abandonment? Isolation? Financial insecurity? Public humiliation? Global warming? Terrorism? Our fears vary from person to person; and we would probably agree, they also vary in terms of the degree to which they are reasonable and unreasonable. Probably like the distinction we make between major and minor surgery, reasonable versus unreasonable fears depends on whether we are talking about my fears or yours. I recall my surprise when John Claypool, my pastor during my days in seminary, admitted in a sermon to a deep fear that he would step to the pulpit someday and have nothing to say. I could not understand how this highly gifted preacher could be gripped by such a seemingly unreasonable fear. I could not understand, that is, until I, too, began grappling with the challenge of preparing and delivering sermons to people week after week. Preparing sermons that interpret scripture and life in a way that it was both richly relevant and deeply true to the well springs of our faith is, to put it mildly, a challenge.

Whether we experience fear or not does not seem to be a matter of choice. More important than whether we admit to having fears is the question of what we do with our fear. More than a half century ago, Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most respected and influential theologians in American history, pointed to the deadly implications of fear in the formation of personal and societal prejudice. Fear at the prospect of loss of face, loss of position in society, loss of economic stability leads, he suggested, to the victimization of entire classes, races and nationalities of people. The resulting inhumanity visited upon our objects of scorn is then blamed upon the victims themselves. The victims of our prejudices suffer at our hands and under our discriminatory laws because of their perceived infectious deficiencies from which we must protect ourselves. "Hatred," C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* would later put it, "is often the compensation by which a frightened man reimburses himself for the miseries of Fear. The more he fears, the more he will hate."

The mariners sacrificed Jonah and later offered a secondary sacrifice to his god out of fear. Emmett Till,

murdered at the hands of white supremacists in Mississippi; Matthew Shepard, beaten to death by homophobic bullies in Wyoming; James Byrd, dragged to his death behind a pick-up truck in Jasper, Texas; and countless women and children, suffering at the hands of their abusers bear witness to the tragic toll of human fear. Even more despicable is the claim that God is the author of such fear and that the violence of the sick minds among us and the inequities of our laws reflect God's own bidding.

So, what do we do with our fears? As we will see in the coming weeks, the parable of Jonah will go on to show us a better way; and so does the life and ministry of Jesus. Matthew's story of Jesus encountering the disciples on the water is first of all a story about the identity of Jesus, but it is also a story about the disciples' fear. After a day of teaching and feeding the multitude, Jesus, Matthew tells us, "made the disciples get in the boat and go to the other side." Battered by the waves all night and unable to move toward land because of a headwind, the disciples languished on the sea all night. Early in the morning, seemingly in the predawn hours known as the "fourth watch," the darkest time of night, Jesus came "walking on the sea," terrifying the disciples who thought he was a ghost. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," Jesus consoled them. Peter then, seeking Jesus' invitation to join him on the water, begins walking, only to begin sinking when he was remembered the strong wind. Jesus, responding to his cry, reaches out to save him with the gentle chastisement, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

In several instances in Matthew Jesus chides those of "little faith," and on all but one occasion he is speaking of the disciples. "To be of 'little faith,' then," Beverly Gaventa suggests, is not to be completely devoid of faith, but to be among the disciples, "struggling, asking questions, misunderstanding, fearing and starting all over again. It is, however, to be within the circle of those who have at least glimpsed who Jesus is" [*Christian Century*, JI 14, 1993]. Faith does not eliminate our fears nor preserve us from doubt and misunderstanding. "Faith does, however, teach us whose name to call and who waits to calm us, for faith knows who is powerful over the deep of our fears as over the deep of the waters."

After his encounter with Jesus on the sea, Peter will have other moments of fear and doubt. His words at the moment of Jesus' arrest—"I do not know the man!" will haunt him the rest of his life. Torn between his loyalty to the gospel and sitting at table with Gentile Christians in Galatia, he will shamefully choose to sit in the safety of his Jewish brethren. Peter will again, however, take the risk of "getting out of the boat." He will venture into Caesarea to step into the living room of the Roman centurion Cornelius on the premise that those whom God has made clean should not be called or treated as unclean.

Faith, you see, frees; and each and every day of our lives and in each and every instance, we decide whether we will walk in faith or cling to the supposed protection of our fears. Faith does not banish fear, but it does call us to walk forward in spite of our fears. Dealing with the ongoing duel between faith and fear some years ago, the great Riverside preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick said it well: "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" [quoted in *Journal for Preachers*, 1996].

I hope you will not be shocked if I say to you that I do not much care whether you literally believe that the fish swallowed Jonah or Peter walked on water. It does matter whether you believe and stake your life on the conviction that there is one present in the darkness, who cares and is able to sustain you. And it does matter that very early in your faith journey and all the way through you know deep down inside of yourself that this one who cares and sustains you, cares and sustains all of the children whom he loves. And so, know yourself strengthened in your personal battles, but also know yourself called and strengthened to go forward in faith to face the storms of discrimination and hatred, and place yourself squarely on the side of justice and love. "God," John says "is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:16-19).

In the words of Fosdick's hymn that we sang with such joy this morning, we go forward with the prayer: "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days, for the living of these days."