

Fear – friend and foe and gift

Have you known fear? Fear of embarrassment, or offering love that might not be returned, or for the well-being of a loved one.? Maybe, you have known the fear that is wrapped in dread. Fear of imminent death.

Fishermen have a healthy respect of the sea; fear is a part of that respect – they know the power of wave and wind. They also know no man cannot conquer the power of the sea. But one did.

In biblical thought, as you know, the sea represented chaos, a dangerous dark power threatening all the goodness and order in the world and held in check only by the God of all creation. This conception of the nature of the sea was in the mind of the disciples. To be out at sea, far from land as a storm blew up, would have caused them to be in great fear for their lives. They were in dread of what could happen. Then, against all sense and hope, a figure appears on the water. They cannot imagine such a being could be anything but an apparition, a ghost. Something unwholesome from the chaos. And yet....

Had they not just a short time before, before they got into the boat, witnessed an amazing event as Jesus took a small amount of bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to five thousand men, plus women and children. Not only was there enough for all, there were twelve baskets of bread left over.

Did it really happen that way? Did the disciples not see this as a sign that Jesus was the Messiah? There is no comment from the disciples recorded for us. However, Matthew is telling us, of a moment in which the presence of God in and through Jesus is made known, in this sign of feeding many in which very little became an abundance - sufficient for the whole world and for the whole world.

In the boat, in the storm, had the disciples so quickly forgotten? Or did they not understand, as St. Mark tells his readers in his telling of this episode. As the waves threaten, in the dark, and in their fear, the voice of Jesus calls to them, “it is I, do not be afraid.” But they are afraid. Peter puts Jesus’ reassurance to the test: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus responds with one word: Come.

Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk on the water, but the chaos of which he is so deeply afraid, overwhelms and he loses his focus, vacillates, and begins to sink. “Lord, save me,” he cries out. Jesus immediately takes him by the hand and raises him up, saying you of little faith, why did you doubt”

What should impress us, is not that Peter faltered, but that he got out of the boat at all and began to walk toward Jesus in spite of a profoundly deep fear of drowning, a death dreaded with every human instinct. When Peter is saved, when the disciples are safe in the Presence, in the boat, the awe they experienced was not so much of Jesus defying gravity, as it was of the power of Jesus over chaos. Dark chaos had separated them from all hope of rescue. Then, Jesus came.

Peter’s story is our story too. In the midst of our personal storms, fear, and doubt Jesus comes. In our doubt, in our fear, he calls to us, “Come.” He reaches to take those that are sinking by the hand to raise them up. And, we ought not to imagine that if we had enough faith we could overcome all our troubles, all the injuries and insults of misfortune, disease, aging, and unhappy circumstances. The lesson here is not so much about having unfailing faith, as it is about have enough faith to get out of the boat.

Nor should Peter’s vacillation, and beginning to sink, divert eyes from Jesus coming in the midst of chaos, in the dark night. The storms of life, personal or national, great or small, of large consequence or little, Jesus comes. His authority and mercy is overall things, in all

circumstances, in our sinking, and in our rising up into a place of safety and hope. His hand always extended to raise up those who call upon him for help.

We of the post-modern age often have difficulty with biblical stories of what we call the miraculous. For the people of our Lord's day, such events were not miracles such as we think of them, but signs – signs of God's presence and power. Nonetheless, for us it can be problematic. Walking on water – really? Not only Jesus, but Peter also for a few short moments, held up by his trust in Jesus.

What is a quark? What is a Lepton? A quark is a point particle. The smallest subatomic particle we know of to date. It is called a point particle because it has no measurable spatial extent and no internal structure. This is also true of Leptons. These two subatomic particles are so infinitesimally small it is hard to imagine they could even exist at all, yet these two particles are the fundamental building blocks of all matter. What do we know of the enormity of all that exists?

C.S. Mann in speaking of the miracles in Matthew's gospel said. "One of the few things that us certain about the universe, as we now know it, is the total uncertainty of any firm statement of invariable cause and effect. It is not even certain how far we are justified in speaking of "invariable sequence." Only the most unsophisticated among us can any longer pretend that miracles, in whatever sense understood, "cannot happen."

The mystery of being, of time and space, draws us into its beauty and complexity; as the disciples were drawn into the wonder and mystery of Jesus, so we too are drawn by faith into the mystery and wonder of God with us in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

We are troubled by the trouble all around us. A darkness, a time of chaos and threat seems to have come upon the whole world. There is no Shangri-la. We all are out at sea in a very small boat, wave and wind seem ever higher, and more violent. Undoubtedly, you have heard before now this description of the world. But, the world has always held threat, disaster, chaos, destruction and human despair. In our edgy faith, in our moments of feeling the power of chaos and threat, there is the wonderful declaration from Isaiah 7:14: “with us is God.” Emmanuel!

Fear may confuse one’s sight, keep one from recognition of the Presence, recognition of Jesus from being immediately seen, but let this word rise in heart, mind and spirit: Emmanuel. Jesus comes to save, comes to reassure, to restore not in our confidence, but in our doubt and fear. So, remember our Lord’s words to the disciples: “do not be afraid.”

Yet, fear is a gift from God, as is love, faith, hope, our ability to imagine, our thirst for understanding and knowledge. Fear keeps us from recklessly taking unnecessary risks, fear keeps us vigilant of the very real dangers in day-to-day life, speeding cars and - crumbling cliff edges? We remind one another, mothers to children, husbands to wives, wives to husbands, be careful.

We know the dangerous can happen. Even Jesus warned the disciples to be careful, as it were, when he cautioned the disciples he sent out to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” But, he also said, “do not be afraid

Do not be afraid to go toward that to which Jesus calls you. If there should be a mis-step, an overwhelming fear, even defeat, He is there ready to save and lift up. He is Immanuel. Amen. “Maybe” by Mary Oliver