

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, JUNE 21, 2009
REV. BILL LOVE

AND THERE WAS A GREAT CALM

1 Samuel 17:32-49
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

Most parents, before turning in for the night, like to make sure that their families are safe and well protected. They check to see that the doors are locked and bolted..., that the batteries in the smoke detector are good..., that the baseball bats are within arm's reach. Then they go to sleep--unaware that their loved ones are easy prey for the most terrifying danger of all: deadly snakes.

Many people think that deadly snakes can't live in cold climates, and they're partly right: When it's cold, deadly snakes head for warm places. Homes, for example.

*In the home, the favorite nesting place for deadly snakes is at the foot of the bed...under the covers. Here, public awareness is the solution: If every parent would simply whack the bed a few times with a baseball bat **before** the child crawls in, the danger of bed snakes could be completely eliminated.*

But how do deadly snakes enter the home in the first place? The answer is obvious, if only we will think about it. Our municipal sewer systems are teeming with deadly snakes..., snakes that were once kept as pets, but of course when their owners found out they were deadly, they were flushed down the toilet. They live in sewers, but when it's cold they seek a warm place, and what is more natural than for them to try to get out of the sewer the same way they went in?

*That's why the Fearmonger's Shoppe recommends Safety Seats for every toilet in your home. When closed, Safety Seats clamp on tight to the toilet bowl, keep snakes **in**.... Open it up, and the Safety Seat unfolds to become an **elevated** seat. ...36 inches above water level, safely out of reach of even the longest snake--even those chain snakes that get up on each other's shoulders.*

*So give deadly snakes the old one-two: One, beat the bed with a baseball bat, and two, get a Safety Seat from the Fearmonger's Shoppe...maker of home-defense systems. Remember: Where safety's concerned, don't look for savings. Shop at the Fearmonger's. Serving your phobia needs since 1954. ["Deadly Snakes", **A Farewell to a Prairie Home Companion**, Summer 1987, 92,94]*

That's the way the commercial for the fictional Fearmonger's Shoppe went--as if there were not enough in life to be afraid of--real snakes, for example, where they really are found without imagining any more places to look for them.

There's enough in life to be afraid of.

* * *

There was a storm brewing. The disciples had plenty to be afraid of when they were crossing the Sea of Galilee, and a great storm arose, and the wind blew, and the waves beat against the boat. They had a realistic fear that the boat would sink and they would die in the storm.

And through it all, Jesus is in the back of the boat, asleep.

They woke him up. Teacher, do you not care if we perish?

* * *

Teacher, they call him. Teacher--though they do not expect him to pull out his lesson plan on the nature of storms or give a lecture on survival techniques.

A teacher is one who communicates through words. And, for Mark, it is the title given to Jesus both when he is teaching and when he is casting out demons. Indeed, if we believed in such things, we might say that the natural world around them seemed to be possessed by an evil spirit. And the disciples needed someone who had power over such spirits.

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The church to whom Mark wrote was a church that was being persecuted and needed to know that their Savior was present with them with the power to keep them from perishing. Jesus was present with them, and the power of his presence was the power of the Word.

AND THERE WAS A GREAT CALM -- 2

The church which hears Mark's words today is a church that needs to know that our Savior is present with us with a power to keep us from perishing.

Teacher, they say to Jesus. One who possesses the power of the word is asked to speak that word of power.

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In the beginning, God created through the Word, Genesis tells us. The gospel of John says, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

Speaking to Job, God asks the rhetorical question: *Who shut in the sea with doors,/when it burst forth from the womb;/when I made clouds its garment;/and thick darkness its swaddling band,/and prescribed bounds for it,/and set bars and doors,/and said, "Thus far you shall come and no farther,/and here shall your proud waves be stayed"?* [Job 38:8-11]

Teacher, they call Jesus. One who speaks with authority, speak the word that controlled the sea in creation so that you control the sea now.

* * *

Teacher, do you not care if we perish?

Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, *Peace! Be still!* These are the same words that he spoke when he cast the demon out of a man in the synagogue in Capernaum.

Peace! Be still! he said. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

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If the sequence of events were the storm, the fear of the disciples, and the calming of the storm, then we would have a nice story from which we could draw a sweet and comforting and comfortable moral--which might or might not serve us well the next time we are caught in a storm at sea.

But that's not nearly all of the story.

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After calming the storm, Jesus asked, *Why are you afraid?* (not *why were you afraid?* but *why are you afraid?*) *Have you no faith?*

When they heard Jesus' question, our translation of Mark says, *They were filled with great awe.* What Mark said in the Greek literally is: *They feared a great fear.*

I remember times when I have been afraid. I remember the sense of panic, trembling with the certainty that the worst that I feared would come true. The phrase *filled with awe* does not begin to describe how I felt. To say *I feared a great fear* comes a lot closer.

The disciples feared a great fear.

* * *

What was there to be afraid of? The danger of the storm has passed.

UNLESS -- there were another storm brewing?

And that storm is the storm that was brewing inside the disciples--and which brews inside us all. And that storm is our fear that life is meaningless, our fear of our guilt and shame, our fear of death and nothingness. And our fear of facing these fears.

We are afraid to face them--fearing that they may destroy us and, by not facing them, we give them more power over us. So we do not always handle them very well.

We tend to attach these unnamed, unfaced fears to objects in the material world, like strangers or closed-in spaces or wide-open spaces or black cats or the number 13 or snakes in the plumbing. So the fears we try to avoid facing show up anyway, in ways unrelated to the real fear, often in ways that are not healthy or helpful.

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Peace! Be still! Jesus said to the storm at sea.

And, while we long for that kind of inner peace for the storm within, it is difficult to find that quiet, even in the presence of God.

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There was a minister on the verge of a breakdown, who went to a psychiatrist. The minister had been working 14 hours a day. His nerves were at a ragged edge. His hands trembled. The psychiatrist asked if he wanted to get well. He said, of course, he did.

AND THERE WAS A GREAT CALM -- 3

The psychiatrist's prescription was to work only 8 hours a day, to sleep 8 hours, and to spend the rest of the time in his study alone, in quiet.

At supper that night, he explained to his wife what he was going to do--and went to his study and stayed for several hours. While he was there, he played a few Chopin etudes and finished a Hermann Hesse novel. The next day, he did the same thing--this time reading Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and listened to a Mozart sonata.

The following morning he went back to the psychiatrist, complaining that he was not better, and told what he had done. The psychiatrist said, *You do not understand. I didn't want you with Hermann Hesse or Thomas Mann or even Mozart or Chopin. I wanted you all alone with yourself.* The minister looked terrified and said, *Oh, but I can't think of any worse company.* The psychiatrist said, *But that is the self you inflict on other people 14 hours a day.* [Morton Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence*, 84]

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There is a storm brewing--within the disciples and within us--for *our fight*, Paul said, *is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil....* [Eph. 6:11, NEB] Only the full armor of God will do, if we are to stand our ground.

* * *

There is a storm brewing. *Teacher, do you not care if we perish?* And the question no longer is a question of physical safety but of our spiritual safety.

Jesus asked, *Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?*

And they feared a great fear; they were filled with awe. *Who is this that even wind and sea obey him?*

* * *

Frederick Buechner wrote: *I remember seeing a forest of giant redwoods for the first time. There were some small children nearby, giggling and chattering and pushing each other around. Nobody had to tell them to quiet down as we entered. They quieted down all by themselves. Everybody did. You couldn't hear a sound of any kind. It was like coming into a vast, empty room.*

Two or three hundred feet high the redwoods stood. You had to crane your neck back as far as it would go to see the leaves at the top. They made their own twilight out of the bright California day. There was a stillness and stateliness about them that seemed to become part of you as you stood there stunned by the sight of them. They had been growing in that place for going on two thousand years. With infinite care they were growing even now. You could feel them doing it. They made you realize that all your life you had been mistaken. Oaks and ashes, maples and chestnuts and elms you had seen for as long as you could remember, but never until this moment had you so much as dreamed what a Tree really was.

Behold the man, Pilate said when he led Jesus out where everybody could see him. He can't have been much to look at after what they'd done to him by then, but my guess is that, even so, there suddenly fell over that mob a silence as awed as ours in the forest when for the first time in their lives they found themselves looking at a Human Being. [Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, 16-17]

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In Jesus' calming the storm, they--and we--see the power of God that has the power to calm our storm as well. Yet, we have held so tightly to our fear that we fear letting go.

If we see in Jesus what a human being is--what human life is supposed to be, then what is this I have been living, that we have been living. The difference is great. And what we would have to face in ourselves to get to Jesus' kind of humanity is frightening.

So, too often, we take what seems like the easy way (though it is hard enough), and we make a religion of fear. We wall off those parts of ourselves of which we are afraid, about which we feel guilty or angry or ashamed. And, under the threat of hell, we try to keep them in darkness, as if that were possible.

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There is a problem with that. The problem with that is that God loves us.

AND THERE WAS A GREAT CALM -- 4

If you've ever loved, you know something of the problem. One who loves wants to know not some custom tailored version of the beloved but the whole person.

Morton Kelsey says, *What is true of human relationships at their deepest and best is even more true of the relationship with God. It is not very hard to know when we are at our best in relating. At those times we want to know all about the other person, including the darkness and shadow, so that we can love [and] care for that [person] better. If one loves, one can bear everything. And the incredible mystery of Christianity is that God wants to know us in that way, in total depth and reality, the darkness as well as the light, the anger as well as the love.* [Kelsey, 18]

The walling off of those things of which we are afraid or ashamed does not get rid of them. They are still there. It simply means that we do not allow them to be touched and transformed by love.

The search for the alchemist was to turn a base metal into gold. When our fears are touched by love, that is the transformation that takes place. And the base metal of human nature becomes as brilliant gold.

The problem with the fear is that it will not go away on its own, and we cannot wall it off. It is necessary to face the fear and the meaninglessness and guilt and anger and shame and death--and to pass through them to find the reality on the other side.

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The disciples--and we--fear a great fear.

Teacher, do you not care if we perish?

Jesus cared enough that we not perish that he died on the cross to defeat all that would distort or destroy human life.

Though we still must face our fears, in Christ, we know that the battle has been won.

* * *

Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?

Faith as an answer to fear is not merely intellectual assent but faith as **trust**.

There is a story of a man who must cross an abyss but is unable to. He discovers that there is a tightrope stretched across the abyss. He sees an acrobat, slowly but surely, coming across the tightrope, pushing a wheelbarrow with another performer in it.

When the acrobat saw how amazed the man was, he asked, *Don't you think I can do it again?*

The man said, *Yes, I certainly believe you can.*

The acrobat asked a second time, *Don't you think I can do it again?*

The man said, *Yes, I think you can.*

The acrobat said, *Good! Get in, and I will take you across.* [Kelsey,41]

There's a difference in thinking that the acrobat could push the wheelbarrow across the abyss with the performer in it and getting into the wheelbarrow yourself.

It's the second kind of faith--that trust--that Jesus is talking about.

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Jesus said, *Peace! Be still!* to the storm at sea. And Jesus is ready to say, *Peace! Be still!* to the storms within us all.

Don't you believe that he can do it again?

Good! Get in the wheelbarrow. On the other side of the abyss of our fear, there is a great calm.