

In the creation story in Genesis, we read of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, something which had been specifically denied them. Knowing that God is searching for them they attempt to hide. It's a scene that may remind some of us of our childhood, when we had done something wrong, and we literally hid from our searching parents. Finally God finds Adam and Eve and as we know, it was obvious that He would find them because we cannot hide from God. God asks them why they are hiding, and Adam answers: *Because, I was afraid!* I think this story reminds us that fear is so basic to who we are as humans, and that fear goes all the way back to the beginning of time. To be human is to experience fear.

There seems to be no limit to our fears. Sometimes we are afraid of everything, we are afraid of ourselves, afraid of people; afraid of the future or the past. We are even afraid of life and of death. Everyone must fight their own fears. Even the Apostle Paul knew what it was to fight fear, and he wrote of his fear when he arrived in Corinth: *For when we came into Macedonia we had not rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fighting; within were fears.* Paul was full of fears just like us and Paul knew the fear of inadequacy or failure. But perhaps the most surprising fear for many people, and one that we do not like to admit, is the fear of God. It's the fear that God is not really on our side. It's the fear that God may put us out on a limb and leave us. It's the fear that in the midst of the storm, we may be overcome!

This fear is nothing new: One of the great fears of the ancient people was that God would fall asleep, which may seem ridiculous to us. But when the prophets of Baal couldn't get their Gods to rain down fire on the top of Mt. Carmel, Elijah taunted them saying: *Maybe your God is asleep?*

On the other hand, the Hebrews took great comfort in the fact that God never slept. ***One of the most repeated messages of the Bible is Fear Not!*** When Abram took his family to the Promised Land, he feared that he was turning his back on everything he knew, he was exchanging his security for the unknown. God spoke to him: *Fear not Abram, I am your shield and your reward will be great.* When the Jews stood at the Red Sea and could see Pharaoh's chariots on the horizon, terrified they would all be slaughtered; Moses said to them *Stand still, fear not, and see the salvation of the Lord.* When the angel of the Lord told Mary she would bear a child, she trembled with fear. She was worried about what would become of her but the angel said: *Fear not Mary, you have found favour with God.*

So three things about fear; and the first is that ***We must confront our fears*** for we pay a price when we don't deal with our fears. What starts as a little doubt, perhaps sparked by something someone said or a newspaper report we read, soon grabs our imagination and before we know it, we are experiencing real fears. It's said that the thing that robs us of our peace more than anything else is our imagination. It's in our minds that our fears are born and often nurtured. Simon Peter is on board a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee after a long day. Earlier in the day he saw Jesus take five loaves of bread and two fish and feed over 5,000 people. Now Peter's stepping out of the boat, trying to imitate his Master walking on the water. Peter's successful for a moment, but then he realises what he is doing and as his fear rises his body sinks.

Over and over again the message of the Bible is clear: Fear not, fear not. Over seventy times this is mentioned in scripture. If you have fears you're not alone, believe me! Paul in writing to his young disciple Timothy said: ***God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, power and a sound mind.*** If we trust this scripture we can start to deal with our fears. That's the first step, to confront our fear through the knowledge that God is with us. ***God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, power and a sound mind.***

There's a difference between confronting our fears and trying to suppress them, and if we're able to confront our fear, and pray that God will replace fear with a sound mind of love and power, then we'll find that we are not powerless in the midst of the storm. We have God through His Holy Spirit at our side. I can hear God whispering in the Peter's ear: *Stop letting your imagination magnify your fears. The storm is furious but I am greater still.*

So first, we confront our fears and step out of the boat to Christ. And second, ***We must understand that doubt can sink us.*** I can picture the other disciples who were in the boat with Peter in the midst of the storm, and fearing what they thought was a ghost walking on the water. They are exhausted from the long day and they call out to Peter: *Peter, you can't do that. We don't know who that is out on the water. It's a hallucination and it may be the devil. Peter you can't do that, you can't walk on water!* But Peter does. I don't know for how long but Peter walks on the water toward Jesus. Peter said: *Lord if it's you, you can make me to walk on the water with you.* Do you see what Peter is doing here? Peter's walking on water isn't the point. The point is he wants to confirm that this ghost on the water is Jesus. Jesus can make him walk but a ghost will only make him wet.

Peter knows that the Lord can sustain us. Even in the midst of the storm when there's nothing but uncertainty. Jesus will take care of us. But I want you to know that faith is a risk taking enterprise and it doesn't come in a perfect package. I often find myself caught midway between faith and doubt. Peter gets caught between Jesus and the waves, he begins to doubt his walk and he begins to sink. Peter gives an example of what the church can accomplish if we put our faith in Christ, but it also reminds us of our weaknesses. But here's the good news; when our doubts do cause us to sink, we can call on Jesus and His grace will certainly pull us through.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was the first author to alert the West to the horrible realities that millions experienced in Stalin's labour camps. Solzhenitsyn said that only once during his long imprisonment did he become so depressed that he thought about suicide. He was outside on a work detail, and he had reached a point where he didn't care whether he lived or died. When he had a break, he sat down and a stranger who was another prisoner, sat beside him. For no apparent reason, this stranger took a stick and drew a cross on the ground. Solzhenitsyn sat and stared at that cross for a long while. He later wrote, *Staring at that cross, I realized that therein lies freedom.* At that point, in the midst of his own personal storm; he received new courage and the will to live. The storm didn't end that day but through Jesus, Solzhenitsyn found the strength to ride it out.

I don't know what storm of life will come your way this week, or what storm you may be enduring at this very moment. But I know this: Even as the storm rages around you, if you will listen very carefully, you'll hear a gentle voice calling to you: *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. And in time the storm will pass. And Jesus will still be there.*

That leads us to our third and last point: **Regardless of what happens, God will be with us.** The Psalmist wrote: *When I am afraid I put my trust in you.* When we're afraid who else can we turn to? Whatever catastrophe may hit us, God is still the same. God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. God does not change. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker says that so many of the fears that we grapple with, the fear of rejection, abandonment, failure, separation or loss are but manifestations of the one ultimate fear, and that is the fear of death. Perhaps he's right. How do we overcome that ultimate fear? Only through Faith! Faith is the only antidote to exercise the demons of fear that haunt us. I think it's telling that when Peter stepped out onto the water, became terrified and started to sink,

Jesus later asked him why he doubted. Why didn't his faith carry him across the water to Jesus' side? For Peter it was fear. Fear crept in and doubt began to rise and Peter began to sink. It's the story of our life isn't it? In the boat we are safe but on occasion we're willing to brave the storm and walk on water, and do the impossible through our faith. It is then we suddenly realize the wind is in our face and the storm is raging, and it causes fear and doubt creeps. Our faith is so fragile isn't it? I heard of an old minister who was dying and he was asked if he was afraid. The minister replied: *Why should I be afraid? I belong to a father who owns the land on both sides of the river.*

In life there are storms but God is with us. That truth is our great salvation and hope. I want you to know that God cares if you are immobilized by some fear in your life. But there comes a time when like everything else, you must place your fear at the foot of the cross, and then lean back into the arms of an ever loving and gracious God. Then we too can claim God's promise to us: ***God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, power and a sound mind.*** And may you live in this truth. **Amen.**

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