

PENTECOST 5B – June 24th 2018

The Sum of All Fears

(Mark 4:35-41)

There is a story told about the Army's 82nd Airborne Division; an elite unit that specializes in parachute assault operations. They train down at Fort Bragg in North Carolina and, on this particular occasion, their commanding general was inspecting and reviewing the ranks of recently graduated paratroopers. As he walked down the line of soldiers, he paused to scrutinize one who hailed from West Virginia. The young man was standing proudly at attention; jump wings and boots shined to perfection. The general, however, spotted a loose thread on his uniform and scowled: "Trooper, your fatigue jacket is frayed." To which, the young private shouted back: "Sir, beggin' your pardon, sir! But this here airborne jacket ain't 'fraid a-*nothin'*!"

Well, maybe airborne *jackets* aren't, but most of the rest of us *are*... afraid, that is; of something at least. In fact, the technical term, as you may know, is "phobia" and if you Google it you will find list after list of recognized and *recognizable* phobias or fears.

For example, here are some of the more common ones:

- Arachnophobia (it was even a movie title) – is the fear of spiders
- Germaphobia – is the fear of germs
- Claustrophobia – is the fear of confined spaces (I have a little bit of this one. I hate it at the doctor's office, you know, when they ask you to wait in those small, windowless examining rooms? And it takes like forever for the doctor to arrive? As a result, on more than one occasion, I have actually opened the door and stood out in the hallway because I felt too confined.)

- Xenophobia – is the fear of strangers or foreigners (Here in America, we seem to be struggling with this particular one these days, don't we?)

Then there are some other ones that are, perhaps, *less* recognizable but still relatively common like:

- Aerophobia – is the fear of flying, or
- Agoraphobia – is the fear of open spaces or crowds

Still, there are others that actually make perfect sense once when you understand their prefix:

- Hydrophobia – is the fear of water
- Philophobia (from “philos” one of the Greek words for “love.” – is the fear of love
- Arithmophobia (where we get the word “arithmetic” from, of course) – is the fear of numbers, naturally
- Somniphobia (we’ve all heard of *insomnia*, or having difficulty sleeping) – Well somniphobia is the actual *fear* of sleep. (In other words, it’s not that you *can’t* fall asleep, it’s that you *don’t want to* apparently.)
- Dentophobia (here’s another one I have for sure!) – is the fear of dentists
- Wiccaphobia – is the fear of witches and witchcraft

.And some more recent ones as well:

- Technophobia – is the fear of technology
- Cyberphobia (even more specific) – is the fear of computers
- Nomophobia... (now “nomos” is the Greek word for “law,” but that’s not the origin here) – Believe it or not, it’s actually the fear of being without cell phone coverage; either because of a lost

signal or by running out of battery. Seriously. The word is only 5 years old and it was coined in Great Britain where cell phones are called... *mobile* phones. And thus, the “nomo” is apparently short for “no-mobile.”

Not even the church is immune, either:

- Ecclesiophobia (from the word “ecclesia” for “gathering” or “assembly” – is the fear of church, and
- Homilophobia (whose prefix is where we get the words “homiletics” and “homily” from) – is the fear of sermons... (So does that mean that “homilo- *chronos*- phobia” is a fear of *long* sermons?! That would explain a lot.)

And, finally, there’s my favorite:

- Phobophobia (that’s right, you’ve guessed it) – is the fear of phobias, or, quite literally, the fear of *fears*...

It reminds me of something Winston Churchill once observed, during the dark days of World War II: “You may take the most gallant sailor,” he said, “the most intrepid airman, or the most audacious soldier, put them at a table together – what do you get? The *sum* of their fears.”

Two gas company service men, a senior training supervisor and a young trainee, were once out checking meters. They parked their truck at the end of the alley and worked their way down to the other end. At the very last house, a woman standing at the sink and looking out her kitchen window watched the two men as they checked *her* gas meter.

As they finished the meter check, the older supervisor challenged his younger co-worker to a foot race back down the alley to their truck. Just

as they were running up to the truck, however, they realized that the lady from the last house was huffing and puffing right behind them. So they stopped and asked her what was wrong. Gasping for breath, she said, “When I see two gas men running full speed away from my house, I figure I better run too!”

In other words, fear is contagious. It feeds off itself. Put any group of people together – even otherwise courageous people, says Churchill – and their collective fears will only grow and multiply and *intensify*. And that seems to be the current reality in *today’s* world as well. As someone recently wrote, “...for all our unprecedented good fortune, we are in a near-constant state of fear.” Think about it...

Yet, during his first inauguration address, right in the midst of the Great Depression – as tough a time as our nation has ever faced, at least socially and economically – President Franklin Delano Roosevelt made an equally stunning observation of his own. “So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief,” he said, “that the only thing we have to *fear*... is fear itself.”

Fear, as you may have guessed by now – and certainly if you were paying attention to our reading from Mark this morning! – is the theme of today’s Gospel. Or *a* theme.

It’s the well-known story of Jesus stilling or calming the storm. The details are pretty simple and straightforward. One evening, Jesus and the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee when a great windstorm arose, the waves kicked up, and they were quickly in danger of being swamped.

Two interesting things to point out here:

1. Mark tells us that there were other boats out there on the water with them, a detail that only *he* includes by the way; it doesn't appear in either Matthew or Luke, and more importantly
2. Jesus was apparently asleep in the back of the boat at the time.

In other words, they were in danger of sinking – and presumably drowning as well – and Jesus seems to be completely oblivious to what was going on around him. Doesn't he care?

Naturally, of course, that's exactly what the disciples wanted to know as well. They immediately wake him up, saying, "Teacher, do you not *care* that we are perishing?" And then, in Mark's straight-to-the-point style, Jesus simply wakes up and rebukes the wind, saying, "Peace! Be still!" At which point the wind ceased and there was a dead calm...

Now, for as significant and miraculous as that might seem, the *really* interesting part, I think, is what comes next. "Why are you afraid?" asks Jesus. "Have you no faith?"

It should come as no surprise to you that the *word* for fear, in Greek, is *phobeo* (foh-beh'-oh), which is where our English word "phobia" comes from. But here's the thing, Mark doesn't *use* the word *phobeo* here – despite the way it's been translated for us in today's reading. Instead, he uses the word *deilos* (day-los') which actually means "timid."

In other words, he says to them, "Why are you timid?" After all, at least four of his disciples, you recall – Peter and Andrew, James and John – were experienced fishermen, presumably at home out there on the water. And this was almost certainly not the first time, therefore, that they had

ever been caught up in a sudden storm. “So what gives?” Jesus wants to know. “You’ve navigated stormy waters before. Why, all of sudden, are you so timid now?” Which kind of suggests that there may also be *another* way of interpreting this passage.

Well, I think, there is. I’m not saying that this event, this calming of the sea, did not occur as Mark describes it. No, not at all.

But, as many commentators have noted, there’s a message for *all of us* here as well. The boat, you see, is a traditional symbol for the church – our own building looks like an overturned hull, in fact. And the word for the space where you are sitting – the nave – comes from the same word as does “navy” or “naval.” That is, referring to a ship.

So, as many have suggested, Jesus is not merely talking to the disciples out there in that boat with him. For Mark, he’s actually *also* talking to the entire church. And his words apply to *all* Christians who find themselves in tough times or in rough waters; that is to say, confronted by the many and various storms of life. Especially in those moments when it seems like Jesus is completely oblivious to our *own* struggles... and just doesn’t care.

And so Jesus’ response to the disciples, then, is a message for our ears as well. “Why are you so timid? Have you no faith?”

As Rick Morley puts it, “It can’t be said enough: God never, ever, ever promises that nothing bad will happen. God never promises smooth sailing and blue skies every day. If you think that God promises this,” he says, “you haven’t read your Bible lately. What God *does* promise,”

says Morley, “is that when the world comes crashing down, God is right there with us. Jesus is there with us, in the sinking boat.”

A moment ago, I mentioned that the word translated in verse 40 as “afraid” is *not* the word *phobeo*. Nevertheless, that word – or at least a form of it – *does* appear, however, in verse 41.

In response to Jesus’ questions, we’re told, the disciples were filled with “great awe.” At least that’s how it’s been translated. Now I’m not a Greek scholar – far from it; in fact, I’ve pretty much forgotten most of what I learned back at seminary. So I consulted one of my old textbooks “An Analysis Of The Greek New Testament” and, interestingly enough, what the Greek actually says here is this: “They feared a great fear.” Or, another way of putting it is “they were terrified.”

In other words, they may have been timid and frightened in that storm, but that’s nothing compared to how they were feeling now. Now they were absolutely *terrified* by what Jesus has just done. Now they feared a *great* fear. Storms are scary enough. But what about someone who can silence them, who can calm the wind and the waves?

“Who *is* this guy?” they ask themselves. “...even the wind and the sea obey him.”

And while Mark doesn’t actually come right out and say it, the implication is nevertheless pretty clear. Jesus is even *greater* than all the storms that rage around us. Jesus’ power is even more formidable and more fearsome than the very worst that nature – *or life* – has to offer.

Rick Morley, again, puts it this way: “I think that this is Mark speaking directly to the Church, to the early church and to us: There will be times when you feel like your boat is being swamped,” he says. “And when that happens, do not be afraid. Jesus *does* care. Jesus is there. Jesus will calm the storm.”

Whenever you bring people together, as Churchill once observed, the result is the “sum” of all their fears. And fear, because it feeds off itself, can make us do funny things, even unfortunate things; mostly when we *give in* to those fears, instead of having faith, instead of trusting. And, for the church, including and especially *individual* Christians, that means trusting in Jesus; trusting in Jesus even during the most difficult moments of life...

The early Native Americans had a unique way of training young braves. On the night of a boy’s thirteenth birthday, after learning all the various wilderness skills – hunting, fishing, tracking, scouting – he was put to one final test. He was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone.

Until then, you see, he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe. But, on this night, he was blindfolded and taken several miles away to a place he had never been before. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of a thick, dark woods, utterly alone. Unable to see anything. And he was terrified.

Every time a twig snapped, every time an owl hooted, every time there was rustling in the brush around him, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. And this went on all night long. Then, after what seemed

like an eternity, dawn would break, and the first rays of sunlight would slowly filter into the dark interior of the forest.

Looking around, the boy could now see wild flowers, trees, and the outline of a path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he could also see the figure of a man standing just a few feet away; armed with bow and arrow... It was his father. And he had been there all night long.

In the very same way, Jesus is with each of us in the darkest moments of *our* lives. As we heard in today's gospel, Jesus was in the stern of that boat being tossed about by that raging storm. In the very same way, Jesus is at the end of our hospital bed whenever we are sick or injured. He's sitting with us at the kitchen table as we struggle to pay our bills. He's there with us at work when the job seems overwhelming, or when we receive the bad news that our company has let us go.

He's there when our parenting skills seem woefully insufficient, when caring for elderly parents stretches our patience, when we argue with our spouse, and when we grieve the death of a loved one.

You see, there is no storm, no problem, no tragedy where Jesus is not right there beside us. When all is raging around and about us, when the darkness is so *black* that we are not able to see, Jesus is still there with us.

He hasn't abandoned us. He isn't snoozing, or on a lunchbreak. Jesus is with us.... always. And if we let him, he says to those storms in our lives, whatever they may be, "Peace. Be still." And in that moment... he will release us from those fears. Amen.

