

Christ in Crisis: Why am I So Afraid
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Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

What is it about FEAR and the American psyche?

Franklin Roosevelt in his first inauguration said words we all are familiar with:
"We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

We often seem to speak of fear as if it were an enemy to be vanquished rather than a normal and perfectly natural emotion.

It is almost as if we believe that fear is a sign of weakness.

We certainly do not want to be afraid
and we do not want to look afraid

But fear is normal.

I grew up being taught that fear creates in us a fight or flight response.

- Fear keeps us from burning ourselves on a hot stove
- or from getting run over when we try to cross a street

Fear is a biological process
It is hard wired into us
We were born with it

I could even say --- God created us that way.

When our senses perceive a threat, our brain triggers a cascade of approximately 1,500 biochemical responses that include diverting blood and oxygen away from nonessential (at that moment) organs and toward our brain, heart, liver and muscles to help us resist or escape the threat;

dilating our pupils to help us see it more clearly;
decreasing our sense of pain;
and even producing more blood-clotting platelets to help us deal more effectively with any injuries.

In other words, the fear that sets our bodies response into motion to make us stronger, faster, more alert and more focused.

Our ancestors would not have survived without it.
This kind of fear is a gift from God.

Today, this fight or flight response is less likely to be triggered by wild animals and more likely to be triggered by interpersonal, financial and other stressors
including stress about a virus that continues to claim lives around us.

But fear can also be used as a tool against us.

Fear can be used to make us afraid of things that really don't warrant our fear.

When I think back on my life, one moment of fear jumps ahead of all others.
September 11, 2001

If you are old enough --- you remember exactly where you were when you heard the news of the planes being flow into the World Trade Center towers

But what I also remember is being afraid.

My girls were all in school
Nancy was also at school --- and I was afraid for them
And all I remember was talk about a plane coming toward Chicago

There was not fight or flight --- I found myself paralyzed for a time

And then we turned our fear into hatred of people of Middle Eastern descent

- A local grocery store (that my girls often rode their bikes to alone) --- was vandalized because their owners were Muslim, just a couple blocks from my house
- Muslim families woke up to horrible things spray painted on their property in my neighborhood

It was a terrible time --- where fear was used to make us see others as OTHER

We were AFRAID!

If I was to ask you: WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?
How would you answer me?

That is a tough question, and my hunch is our answers have changed over these last few months

we have experienced a whole new level of fear as a result of COVID-19,
the protests following George Floyd's killing
and the storms that have ravished parts of the East Coast.

The challenge for us, as we talk about fear is asking ourselves a question.
When is fear necessary and even useful,
and when is it harmful and destructive?

Fear is a common topic in our biblical story.

The story of Jesus opens with the angels telling us not to be afraid.

Mary
Joseph
Elizabeth
even the shepherds

Over 300 times the bible reminds us not to fear or be afraid.

Or maybe more appropriately the bible tells us again and again how not to dwell in fear.

I love the story of Jesus walking on the water that is found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John --- I think it has some good advice for us in how we deal with fear.

Jesus sends the disciples ahead and goes off to pray by himself --- which is something he would often do

The disciples were heading across the lake of Galilee and hadn't gotten very far because a storm had come up --- all night long they battled this storm.

Early the next morning --- Matthew tells us --- they see someone walking toward them on the water --- and they all assume it is some type of demon or ghost --- and the story tells us that they were all afraid.

Do you remember what Jesus said to them?

"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

It's me --- you don't need to be afraid.

That is the promise of the Gospel in a nutshell

We started this morning with one of my favorite Psalms --- the 23rd Psalm

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil:"

Why not --- "for thou art with me;"

How many times have I shared those words? . . .

It's not that we should not be afraid --- fear is necessary

But we should not let that fear control us or paralyze us

In 2nd Timothy 1:7 it is written (NKJV)

For God has **not** given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

Too often FEAR is used to make us hate

To turn against the "other"

But we are called to be filled with a spirit of power and of love --- and maybe the most important part of that advice is "a sound mind."

We need to ask ourselves:

Is this something really to be fearful of,
or is my mind creating a bigger and maybe false fear?

Please don't get me wrong --- fear is a natural part of life.

What my concern is --- is our response to fear

When we live in what Paul called "a spirit of fear" --- that way of life is not healthy and can lead us to dehumanize others if we allow that fear control us.

Fear can lead us into saying and acting in ways that can be very destructive

And that happens --- I believe --- because we forget about God --- we develop what has been called a "spiritual amnesia" --- we forget who God is and God's promise to always be with us.

We act as if we are the only ones who can solve the problem --- so instead of turning toward God --- we turn toward ourselves

Only WE can fix it --- we start to believe

And the power of love that God speaks of get lost.

Jim Wallis puts it this way:

It is how we respond to fear that brings faith, life, common sense, and hope instead of dysfunction, despair, destruction, and even death. Faith is finally believing in love

instead of fear, and believing that fear can be overcome by love --- especially by the perfect love that Jesus teaches us.

The objective is not to be fearless.

The objective is not to let fear consume or control us.

When fear is in control it pushes us away from God.

Wallis argues that fear can actually be a friend --- a reminder --- when it causes us to lean into God

I love that phrase --- **lean into God**

So what is it that you are afraid of?

In this day and age, I think we all wrestle with many different fears

And we are invited to ask:

Is this fear necessary and maybe even useful?

Or is this fear harmful and destructive?

Is this fear drawing me closer to God?

Or is this fear causing me to turn my back on God and God's kingdom?

Remember what is written in 2nd Timothy 1:7 (NKJV)

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

When I become afraid --- my mind always goes back to what God told Joshua (1:9)

"Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."