

Sermon for Zion, August 18, 2019

Hymns: 339 – He’s Got The Whole World; 64 – Be still and know;

741 – Like a mighty river flowing; 728 – The storm is strong; we face the wind

Scripture: Isaiah 41:10-13; John 14:27

Sermon Title: That Sinking Feeling

*Isaiah 41:10-13*

*Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. Behold, all those who were incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; they shall be as nothing, and those who strive with you shall perish. You shall seek them and not find them — those who contended with you. Those who war against you shall be as nothing, as a nonexistent thing. For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’*

*John 14:27*

*Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid*

When I was about four years old or so, there was a big event on television. The Wizard of Oz! They used to show it every year back then, and at the age of four, I was considered old enough to watch it. So I did. But I wasn’t. I wasn’t old enough to watch it. I was able to handle the tornado, I was able to handle the Munchkins, I was even able to handle the flying monkeys. But I was not able to handle the Wicked Witch of the West. I was terrified of the Wicked Witch of the West. For the first time in my life that I can remember, I felt fear. Real, deep-down-inside, stomach-churning, eyes-wide, blood-draining-from-the-face, hair-standing-on-end fear. It didn’t matter that it was just a movie, it didn’t matter that I was watching it on a fuzzy 19 inch black and white TV in the safety of my own living room, surrounded by my mother and father and sister. I was terrified. I was filled with fear.

I couldn’t get to sleep that night. Or the next night. Or the next. I became afraid of the dark. I didn’t want to sleep in my bedroom alone. The branches of the tree outside my window suddenly looked to me, at night, like a witch. When the wind blew and they rattled against the house, it was a witch. My curtains were folded just like a witch’s cloak. When the furnace came on, it sounded like the fire under a witch’s pot. I developed an irrational fear of brooms. I can still replay, in my mind, just what it felt like to be laying in bed, eyes wide, staring at the ceiling, waiting for Margaret Hamilton to come cackling in through my bedroom window to snatch me away and boil me up with eye of newt and toe of frog.

I've never watched the Wizard of Oz again. To this day I won't watch it. Not that I'm still afraid of witches – I'm a big boy now – ahem – but I don't want to unnecessarily traumatise the little Dougie who still resides somewhere deep down in my subconscious.

I know. It doesn't make sense. But fear is like that. Fear doesn't have to make sense. Maybe you have a fear from way back in your childhood that still gives you a little adrenaline jolt when you see a snake, say, or a spider, or God forbid a clown, or any number of things that lurk in the dark closets of our mind.

The fear Peter felt was perfectly rational, though. Perfectly reasonable. You know the story well by now; I'll let The Message tell it again:

*Jesus insisted that the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he dismissed the people. With the crowd dispersed, he climbed the mountain so he could be by himself and pray. He stayed there alone, late into the night.*

*Meanwhile, the boat was far out to sea when the wind came up against the disciples and they were battered by the waves. At about four o'clock in the morning, Jesus came toward them walking on the water. They were scared out of their wits. "A ghost!" they said, crying out in terror.*

*But Jesus was quick to comfort them. "Courage, it's me. Don't be afraid."*

*Peter, suddenly bold, said, "Master, if it's really you, call me to come to you on the water."*

*He said, "Come."*

*Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he was filled with fear and started to sink. He cried, "Master, save me!"*

Now, there are a number of fearful moments, here. First, there is the fear felt by all the disciples, floundering away in the dark, waves crashing, boat filling with water, tempest-tossed. That's a real fear, and a reasonable fear, the fear of your life coming to an end as the elements themselves come against you. If you haven't felt it in a boat, maybe you have in a car, as you suddenly go sideways on that icy road, or as the rain suddenly hammers down so hard your wipers give up and you're blind at 50 miles an hour. That's a real fear, a reasonable fear.

Then, there's a different fear, the fear of the supernatural, the uncanny dread in the presence of what must be, the disciples thought, a ghost, as they saw someone, somehow supported by the waves, lit by the thin light of dawn, looking like nothing

so much as a spook, a spectre, the Angel of Death itself, come to take the disciples away. That's an unreal fear, unreasonable, but no less terrifying somehow.

And then there's what happens to Peter. What happens to Peter is amazing: what happens to him, in the midst of the raging storm, in the face of an uncanny apparition, suddenly, somehow, Peter isn't afraid. Not only is he not afraid, he's about to step out of the boat and right into the teeth of the wind and the waves. What happened?

Well somehow, the wind and the waves just seem to have slipped Peter's mind. It was still howling madly away, but in the light of the presence of Jesus, it didn't seem to matter much anymore. Somehow, the wind, which just moments before had occupied his every thought and action; the waves, which for countless long hours had threatened to completely overwhelm him; somehow, in the light of the presence of Jesus, the wind just slipped his mind.

Funny how a change in perspective can do that. Funny how turning your attention to something other than your own problems, bigger than your own problems, can do that. Funny how focusing on God, how catching sight of Jesus, can cause our overwhelming problems in their overwhelming strident clamour, to recede. Faith can do that. Faith in God can make that kind of difference.

If you don't believe this to be the case, I direct your attention to the Psalms. There are 150 of them, and well over half are complaining bitterly about some desperate situation or another. But in every instance, the Psalmist, despite being overwhelmed by the specifics of his circumstances, finally turns his eyes, his energies, to God - and the problem, while not necessarily immediately solved, is suddenly not quite so overwhelming. It may not be any less serious than it was a moment ago; but it is no longer overwhelming. Psalm 4, for instance, begins in desperation: "Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer." And just seven verses later, the perspective changes: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety."

Suddenly, a sense of possibility, a sense of hope is discovered. Because the perspective has changed. It is changed from the overwhelming reality of the subjective situation, to the no-less-real objective reality of the power and love and hope of God. The Psalmist, with the eyes of faith, catches sight of God, and sees that God is bigger than the problem by far.

Back to Peter. Peter is very nearly overwhelmed by the wind, by the waves. But he catches sight of Jesus, and suddenly, the wind just slips his mind. It hadn't gone away; but its overwhelming importance is diminished in the light of the reality of the power and love and hope of the presence of God.

Away from the Sea of Galilee for a moment, and back to Charlottetown, back to you and me. Every one of us knows someone who manages to carry on through life, persevere in life, even enjoy life, despite the problems that come their way. Some of these problems may be devastating in the extreme, but these people carry on. And every one of us knows somebody who manages to become paralysed, frantic, overwhelmed, in the face of even the most seemingly minor of problems, setbacks or difficulties. What is the difference between these two kinds of people?

Well, there are doubtless some deep-set inherent psychological, physiological and sociological differences that predispose one person to react one way and another person to react completely differently. But speaking within the context of Christian understanding, I think the primary difference is Faith. Somehow, the person of faith - the person in active, prayerful relationship with God - the person with their eyes upon Jesus - is able to see the hope inherent in the midst of any situation. Somehow, the person of faith has a sense of perspective that enables them to rise above the problems and fears that beset them. They are able to glimpse Jesus, even in the teeth of the storm. Like Peter, they're able to put the strong wind aside, and get on with the business of walking on water.

So, Peter takes his eyes off his problems, turns his eyes upon Jesus, looks full in his wonderful face, and proceeds to walk on water, despite the fears which had earlier consumed him. Everything's better now, right? Wrong. Listen:

*Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he was filled with fear and started to sink. He cried, "Master, save me!"*

What happened? It is all right there, for us to read. Triumphant; conquering fear; his eyes on Jesus; his heart filled with faith; believing anything was possible; Peter actually walks on water. Walks on water! Can you believe it? Imagine what was going through his mind at this moment, imagine the pounding of his heart! And, it says, he walked on the water "to Jesus." Like a toddler trying out the new skill of standing upright and moving forward, Peter's got his arms outstretched and his eyes locked on those of Jesus, and he is making his watery way to him. When this happens:

*But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he was filled with fear and started to sink.*

“*When he looked down.*” When he looked down, when he took his eyes off of Jesus, when he focussed and obsessed again about his situation, when he gave in again to fear, he got that sinking feeling. The wind and the water began to win. All because of fear. There is no indication in the story that whatever miraculous change in the properties of water (or of Peter) had ceased or been altered; his sinking was produced by fear. His situation hadn’t changed; his perspective, his attitude had. And there’s the key.

There are times in our life when it is our perspective, our attitude that needs changing more than our situation. There are times in our life when we feel as though we’re sinking and sinking fast, when at other times, we had sailed through such problems, hardly even getting wet. It’s our perspective, our attitude that has changed. It is fear, worry, anxiety - not the situation itself - which threatens to sink us. And the place to go for release from fear, the place to go to evict worry, the solution to all the anxiety which plagues us and sucks the joy from our bones; the place to go is to God. The God of “fear not.” The God of “why waste your life worrying?” The God of “*My peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Trust in God. Trust also in me.*”

Back to John Ortberg, author of our theme book this month, “If You Want To Walk On Water, You’ve Got To Get Out Of The Boat”:

*Peter’s response to the wind and the storm was to give in to fear. He lost the sense of confidence that Jesus was master of the situation. He did not just sink in the water, but sank in his own anxiety and worry. I believe the reason God says “fear not” so often - there are 366 “fear not” verses in the Bible, more than any other command - is that fear will sink us faster than anything else. Fear disrupts faith and becomes the biggest obstacle to trusting and obeying God... Trust and fear have been battling each other for the human heart - your heart - a long time now. Eventually one or the other will win.*

*If fear only happened when it was truly needed - when you are about to be struck by a truck or chased by a homicidal maniac - it would be nothing to worry about. The problem is that for most of us, fear strikes when it is neither helpful nor wanted. It can get attached to what does not truly threaten us and can become paralyzing instead of motivating.*

*In some cases fear ceases to be sporadic and becomes habitual. When this happens, we become worriers. Worry is a special form of fear; fear is caused by an*

*external source while worry or anxiety is produced from the inside. Worry is fear that has unpacked its bags and signed a long-term lease. It needs to be evicted.*

People who seem to be able to rise above the most dire of situations are people who have evicted anxiety, worry, fear. They are people who have turned their eyes away from their problems, and have focussed their attention on God. And if you are wondering how on earth this is possible, if you are wondering where fearful you and fearful me fit in to this story, well, I've got Good News:

God wants more than anything else to be in relationship with us, the loving relationship of a parent to a child, a brother to a sister, a Saviour to a friend. The closer we grow in relationship to God, the farther we grow from fear. The closer we grow in relationship to God (hearing Jesus, hanging around Jesus, practising prayer) the closer we grow in relationship with the reality of the power and love and hope of God; the closer we grow to becoming the people we most want to be, the people God would have us be, the people of joy, the walkers of water, the risers above.

There are bigger fears than witches. Fears of loss: loss of job, loss of health, loss of family. There are fears of powerlessness: independence taken away, loved ones taken away, life itself taken away. There are fears we face lying awake at night, 3 a.m., staring at the ceiling, wondering what on earth can go wrong next. But in the midst of any problem, in the face of any fear, God is there, reaching out to us; God, who will hold us in the palm of his hand, and never let us go.

*Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you...For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Do not fear, I will help you."*

*Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*

Give God your fears. Give God your heart. And find yourself walking on water. Thanks be to God. Amen.