

St. Paul's, Concord  
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Mark 4:35-41  
Rev. Kate Atkinson

What is it that strikes terror in your heart? What scares you the most? When Georgia was little, she was afraid of firefighters, Santa Claus, and Willy Wonka! *Your* greatest fear may be equally irrational. But I know you have one – or even more than one. You may have a phobia of snakes or spiders. You may struggle with a fear of flying. If a mouse runs across the floor, maybe you jump on a chair and scream. (I used to think that only happened in cartoons – until a mouse ran across *my* floor...!)

These days, many of our fears are triggered by threats to our health, our homes and our security. We may tremble at the thought of Ebola or Lyme disease. We monitor news and weather reports closely when ice storms, hurricanes, or wildfires put our property in jeopardy. We hear of terrorist attacks and random shootings and wonder if – or when – they might affect us personally.

But it may be that your worst terrors are the nameless kind. When you go to bed at night, it may not be enough that your doors are firmly locked, that you've left a nightlight on; you may even have activated a home security system and still have a sense of unease. More than anything else perhaps, we fear loss of control over our lives. And, probably more than we care to admit, we fear things that are unfamiliar to us and things we don't understand.

Thousands of years ago, human fears weren't that different from ours – although they were less likely to be irrational back then. After all, snakes and spiders really could be lethal in the days before anti-venom; illnesses were often fatal; and many of the earliest dwellings were no match for fires and storms and other disasters. As for the threat of terrorism or random violence, even before guns and explosives were invented, life was cheap in the hands of the enemy – whoever the enemy happened to be.

But what about the nameless fears? What about that desperate need to remain in control of one's life, that horror of the unfamiliar and the unknown? I believe this kind of fear is the most intrinsic to human nature – and that it has been from the moment we first lived on earth as a thinking, feeling and reasoning species.

We spend a lot of time exploring our fears, trying to identify causes and searching for cures. In biblical times people were less intuitive. They preferred to attribute *their* fear to something tangible. Fear of the unfamiliar, the unknown, the uncontrollable? For the people of Israel, the wanderers of the desert, what could be more unfamiliar, unknown and uncontrollable – what could be more *unfathomable* – than the sea?

Think of the Creation story: the formless, empty earth was covered in deep water and shrouded in darkness. Out of this chaos, God created order, separating day and night, earth and sky, sea and dry land. (Genesis 1:1-8) But even though God contained the water within coastlines and shores, it remained untamed. Deep and mysterious, powerful and wild, teeming with monsters like Rahab (Job 9:13; 26:12; Psalm 87:4; 89:10; Isaiah 30:7; 51:9) and Leviathan, (Job 9:13; 26:12; Psalm 87:4; 89:10; Isaiah 30:7; 51:9) the sea could swallow the sturdiest vessels and the strongest swimmers – never giving them up.

In our gospel passage, Mark describes how a fleet of boats set sail on the Sea of Galilee. Despite its name, Galilee is actually a large lake, 600 feet below sea level, surrounded by hills, with Mount Hermon to the north. The climate is sub-tropical which, combined with the topography, is cause for some unpredictable weather.

Sometimes a cold wind will rush down from the summit of Mount Hermon, or hot air will rise off the surface of the lake and mix with cooler air coming over the hills from the Mediterranean. Either way the result is the same: the lake is whipped into a frenzy, putting anyone on the water in sudden and grave danger. It happens today and there's no reason to doubt that it happened 2000 years ago, when Jesus and his friends set sail for the opposite shore.

Several of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. They were used to being out in all weathers and they'd certainly have experienced harsh conditions. But still they panic. All their deep-seated fears come to the surface as the wind roars and the waves swamp the boat. This was the sea at its most cruel; the ultimate enemy, deep, dark and dangerous. The men fear for their lives, believing there's nothing they can do to save themselves. Then they wake Jesus up to make sure he knows what's happening. (Mark 4:38) Did you notice that that's all they do? They don't wake Jesus to ask for his help. They wake him because they don't think he should sleep peacefully when they're all scared to death! "Don't you *care* that we're perishing?" they ask. They're mad at him!

In the months leading up to this event, the disciples had seen Jesus heal many people – including Peter's mother-in-law; they'd seen him deliver people from demons and evil spirits; they'd even heard the demons and spirits identify Jesus as "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24) and "the Son of God." (Mark 3:11) They'd heard Jesus teach, and challenge religious leaders, and proclaim the Kingdom of God. And yet, in spite of all this, they have so little idea of who Jesus is that they can't even turn to him in their fear, and seek his help.

"Why are you afraid?" Jesus asks, "Have you still no faith?" This is not just a story about the ruler of the wind and the waves. This is an appeal from Jesus to let go of our fear and put our trust in God. "Peace! Be still!" Jesus said. The gospel tells us he's speaking to the wind and the sea – but he's also speaking to his disciples, and he's speaking to *our* hearts as well.

For the men in the boat, the raging waters represent their deepest, their most debilitating fears. Jesus subdues them. Whatever it is that epitomizes fear for us, Jesus urges us to hand *that* fear to him. Don't assume he doesn't care; he does. He cares more than we can imagine. Fear robs us of the life that Jesus longs for us to have in abundance. Fear prevents us from seeing his face in strangers. Fear stifles our senses so that we miss out on the wonder of the world God created and the gifts God gives us.

This past Thursday, the Poor People's Campaign completed a 40-day crusade against injustice and immorality. In 38 states across the country, tens of thousands of people – people of many faiths, and people of no faith – united to speak out against the evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy, and the distorted morality that's so prevalent in our nation. The campaign was endorsed by St. Paul's Vestry, and its New Hampshire branch was a powerful and effective witness to the need for change and healing.

But what comes across so strongly when you look at these failings in our society, is the fear at the root of them all:

Racism, like xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, and so many other phobias, is grounded in a fear of the other, the unfamiliar and unknown.

Poverty is most often caused by inadequate job opportunities, unfair pay and unaffordable housing and services – all of which are a direct result of greed. And greed is the fear of not having enough.

Ecological devastation occurs when human beings believe they have the right to strip bare our natural resources for the sake of profit. Acknowledging the truth of climate change means surrendering control – a terrifying concept for people of power.

And our war economy, fed initially by the fear of enemy attack, is now fed by a more irrational fear – the fear of losing the status and the affluence of being the most powerful nation on earth.

These are the fears that plague so many people today. These are the dark and turbulent waters that strike terror in our hearts. And instead of turning to Jesus for release from our fears, we can fall into the trap of resenting him for not sharing those fears.

Because Jesus is *not* afraid of people who are different. Jesus welcomes the stranger and reaches out to the people on the fringes. And Jesus is not afraid of not having enough because he knows that there's plenty for everyone. Jesus sees no need to conquer the natural environment because he knows that we all benefit when humankind lives in harmony with nature. And Jesus has never striven for power and wealth so he has no fear of losing it.

What Jesus *does* want is for us to acknowledge what we're *really* afraid of and to seek his help in finding an alternative. Those nameless fears that rob us of rest and peace? We need to name them. How have *we* contributed to systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy, and distorted morality, simply because we were motivated by fear of losing control?

In 2006, shortly after her election as Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts-Schori said this in a sermon at General Convention:

*“If you and I are going to grow in all things into Christ, ... our growing will need to be rooted in a soil of internal peace. ... Because ... fear ... is a reaction, an often unconscious response to something we think is so essential that it takes the place of God. If you threaten my self-definition, I respond with fear. Unless, like Jesus, we can set aside those lesser gods...”*

Another bishop, Gene Robinson, often said that the opposite of love isn't hate; the opposite of love is fear. When we're honest with ourselves about what we're really afraid of, we can be honest with God, whose love drives out all fear. And *that's* when we can begin to calm troubled waters and bring peace into the world.