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Matthew 14: 22-33 (with readings from Psalms 27:1-5, 13-14 and 1 John 4:16-18)

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself...”

Good morning brothers and sisters,

As we turn our eyes towards the Word of God this morning, I would like to turn our focus to something we don't talk about very often, but something which is very present in many of our lives. Many of us don't notice it, or even admit it, but this small little companion is a powerful little secret that many of us share. One American president, Franklin D Roosevelt talked about this “dirty little secret” in his inaugural address in 1933, at the very depth of the great economic crisis called the Great Depression. FDR said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I don't know about you, but in this day of rampant terrorism, environmental disasters, strangely mutating diseases, rising taxes, layoffs, shutdowns, rising crime, fear of getting old, fear of dying, fear of leaving the house... it seems like FDR was wrong - it seems that we have much more to fear than fear itself!

Since December I have been thinking about the idea of fear, in part because I was given many books as gifts for my birthday and Christmas, and in most of them, fear came up in some way, directly or indirectly. Since these books were gifts from completely unrelated people on both sides of the ocean, I could have chalked this up to a funny coincidence. Or maybe my friends and family were trying to call me a scaredy cat without hurting my feelings? Either way, the more I read, the more I felt God leading me to share my thoughts with you on fear this morning – as well as setting the record straight with the Biblical perspective on this controversial topic.

In early December a close friend in Munich told me about a book her mother, a nurse, had given her and asked to pass around to all her girlfriends. The book was called *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker, an American consultant who is known as the leading expert on violent behavior. Gavin went on national television to advise people that fear is a wonderful gift which we were all born with but too often ignore. He claims that true instinctual fear is not based on paranoia or watching too many scary movies, but it is the result of a complicated analytical process that goes on unconsciously in our brains. When we feel afraid, there is a good reason why our gut instinct is telling us to watch out. Gavin claims that if we learn to listen to our fears and take them seriously, we can avoid many dangerous situations and reduce violent crimes. To Gavin and his team of experts, fear is a gift.

This was a new way of thinking for me. I had always thought fear was bad, weak, something to be ashamed of. But through this book, I begin to see it as a gift, a blessing, a companion I should feel glad to have. However, God was just getting started to reveal the truth about fear to me.

The next book I was given was a book on CD called *Conversations with God* by Neale Donald Walsch. As I drove all around the southeastern part of the United States in mid-December, I heard this author, who is listed under the New Age section of the American bookstore, talk to his God about the meaning of life and our existence. Sometimes my focus drifted, but at one point I clearly remember Walsch saying that all emotions that we experience come from one of two places: either fear or love. These two are the major (and majorly different) motivating forces for all of our feelings in life. I don't agree with everything in Walsch's book, but this sentence really stuck with me. If fear is responsible for all of the terrible hate and anger and pain in the world, and fear is the opposite of love, and God is love – then how can fear be a gift from God? How can it be a blessing? And why would I want it as my daily companion?

Just as I began to get muddled, I made it home for my birthday on Dec. 19th and was given another book by my brother. This one was a controversial bestseller and Christian work of fiction called *The Shack*. It was written by a Canadian man named William P. Young whose parents raised him in New Guinea where they worked as missionaries. There is a scene in the book where Jesus offers the main character to walk on water. The man is scared, but with Jesus beside him, he walks out across a lake and rejoices that his feet were barely dampened by the cold water. On the way back, he sets off without Jesus and walks boldly onto the lake, believing that he alone can now walk on water. When he quickly begins to sink, Jesus makes a joke like, “that usually works better if I am with you.” That brought my thoughts back to fear – Peter's fear during the storm as he walked across the Sea of Galilee.

Peter's story, found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 14, verses 22-33, is all about fear – and it answered my questions about whether fear was a blessing or a curse. In the story, the disciples were afraid the storms would wreck their boat, Peter was afraid he would sink as he tried to do the impossible, and all of the men were afraid of ghosts. Fear was a strong companion of the disciples in that little boat, which the Bible says was

“battered by the waves... far from land...(with) the wind against them.”

In many ways, this verse reminded me of the last year of my life, as well as various times throughout my life. I have often felt like I was being battered by some very difficult circumstances, far away from the safety of land and the protection of God, with a strong and powerful wind blowing against me. For many of us, the storms of life are not actual rainstorms, but they may be loss of physical health; the loss of a parent, child, family member or friend; the loss of wealth or our homes; the loss of faith and hope; the loss of our way in this world; the loss of ourselves, our values, our priorities.

For many, the storms of life do come with thunder and wind, but with one small whisper of a doctor's voice, one telephone call that changes our lives, one letter received from a bank who wants to foreclose or one email from a company who does not want to hire. The storms can be huge, like the one that rocked Haiti, or tiny, like the rage inside one person who commits a crime. But no matter who we are or where we come from, we are certain to experience the stormy parts of life at some point in time.

But when we are battered by these storms, we should not feel overwhelmed or discouraged. If we look up – as the Disciples looked up – we may be able to see Jesus coming towards us. But, like the Disciples, we may not recognize him.

“And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the seas, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear.”

One famous Christian writer, Max Lucado, wrote about this evening on Lake Galilee in another book I read over the holidays called *Fearless*. He writes that the Disciples, “didn’t expect Jesus to come to them this way. Neither do we. We expect him to come in the form of peaceful hymns or Easter Sundays or quiet retreats. We expect to find Jesus in morning devotionals, church dinners, and meditation. We never expect to see him in a (failing economy, termination of employment,) . . . lawsuit or war. We never expect to see him in a storm. But it is in storms that (God) does his finest work, for it is in storms that he has our keenest attention.”

Lucado claims that if the disciples had been out having a nice peaceful evening on the still waters of lake, Peter may have never walked on water. If Jesus had walked across a smooth and glassy lake, Peter may have applauded the miracle, but he probably would have stayed in the boat. If life was bobbing along just fine and dandy, who would feel the need to take such a dramatic risk?

I don’t know if this rings true in your life, but it certainly does in mine – at the times when I am most afraid and am really getting beaten up by life, that is when I finally turn to God, admit that I am getting nowhere on my own, and ask him to take control of my life. My toughest times are the times when I truly rely on him to keep his promises and be who he says he is – the Creator of the Universe, all-powerful, almighty all-loving and all good. When I give up the need to control my own life and let God lead me, it is then that I come face to face with who is really is; it is then that I come face to face with who I really am; it is then that I embrace my destiny in Christ and am able to do miracles like forgiving myself or others, loving someone who has hurt me, or accepting a situation which breaks my heart. I may not have ever walked on water, but I have certainly gotten out of the boat and walked towards Jesus.

<left out this passage while in pulpit: Even my coming to Germany from the US was a huge step of faith in God and his plan. I wasn’t sure why he had brought me here, and I often tried to convince my husband to take me home during our first year of marriage. But after a few years, I called out to God, “if you want me here in this country, then what do you want me to do here?” And that’s when we found our way to Peace Church and I found my way into preaching and working with the refugees in our church and the English-speaking prisoners in our community. When I first looked out across Bavaria, I saw the ghosts of men in lederhosen and ladies in funny old-fashioned dresses, and I was afraid – very afraid, actually – but when I called out to God, he revealed himself in this place – in the form of great friends who were as close as family, and a large, diverse and loving church family where I could learn and grow and serve.>

In the story of Peter, when the disciples were afraid of the ghost they saw on the water, they too cried out in fear.

“But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Just because we may be suffering from the storms of life, just because we may be afraid and feel alone and not recognize God's presence near us, we should never believe that he is not with us. Remember the story of the Footprints, and know that He is always with us. We can not go anywhere, where God is not.

And Jesus Christ takes our fears seriously. In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus makes over 100 commands to his listeners, and about a fourth of these are orders to "take heart" "have courage" "do not be afraid" or "fear not." Of all of the things he commanded us to remember, these 21 commands not to fear were by far the most often repeated. The next most important command, which was to love God and our neighbors, appears only 8 times in the Gospels.

But back to our text, Peter is having a tough time in the boat. He thinks he sees a ghost, but when Jesus tells him to calm down, take heart, and not to be afraid, he does not just sit back on the boat, relax and enjoy the ride.

"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 towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

When Peter was confronted with the miracle of Jesus walking on water, he wanted to be a part of it. He couldn't just sit back and act unaffected – he had to get up and get going, to get out of his boat of comfort, and to get in on the action. Let this be a lesson to us all – we, too, are called to leave our comfort zones and meet Jesus where he is. We too are called to take a risk get in on the action where God is moving and Jesus is calling out to us, "Come."

Jesus was happy to oblige Peter's request to walk on water. Who wouldn't like to break up a scary storm with an amazing little miracle? Who wouldn't like to be joined by a friend in a special circumstance? As Peter joined Jesus on the lake, I can just imagine a slight smile playing across Jesus' lips. How he must delight when we put our trust in him! Can't you just see Peter – first tentatively stepping out onto the lake, then a smile of surprise that he didn't sink, then straightening his back and marching off proudly across the water towards Jesus? He has his eyes on the Lord and he fully trusts Jesus to protect him.

But as soon as Peter felt a whisp of wind or a small splash of water on his feet, he immediately forgot who he was with and began to think about where he was and what he was doing. Jesus had enabled Peter to walk on water and was literally standing right in front of him, but Peter still began to feel fear. Just for a moment, Peter thinks about the reality of his situation, the risk of his life, the unlikelihood of such a miracle, the absurdity of choice to get out of the boat. . . . tiny doubts take hold, grow quickly into fear, and Peter looks away for just a second at the wind around him and the water beneath him. And he suddenly starts to sink.

It is just that way with us. When we are focused on God and we meet him as he comes towards us, he can make the impossible possible. He can conquer all storms, all fears, all dangers if we can only trust in him. But when take our eyes off of him, we are doomed to sink back into the depths of the realities of our lives. Jesus never promised his followers that their lives wouldn't have storms of difficulty and doubt, but he did promise that if we stay focused on him, keep trusting in him – he will make us bold and strong, he will give us courage and protection, just as the Psalmist wrote. God may not take away our sickness, save the life of our loved one or give us back our job or home or country free from war, but he will

be with us through these storms and grow our faith in him and our trust in his goodness and strength. We are not called to be naïve and ignorant or even happy all the time in this world, for of course we all have our burdens to bear. But if we choose to follow God, we are called to balance long looks at our pain and suffering with long looks into the face of an almighty and all-powerful Creator, trusting him that he will protect us and restore our faith and love.

When Peter called out to Jesus to save him,

“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 worshipped him saying, “Truly you are the son of God.”

Jesus will not leave us hanging, sinking, waiting and wondering. When we call out to him, he will answer us immediately. His answer may not be yes, and he may not do exactly what we would like – but he will reach out his hand, catch us and bring us back into his boat, which sails on calm seas. Even in the middle of a terrible hurricane, there is a calm center in the eye of the storm. In our lives, Jesus is that center. The hurricane winds may still whip about and bruise and beat us up, but we can rest our hope, our faith and our trust in the calm eye of the storm. If we do not let our fears lead us to doubt, then our faith – even if it is as tiny as a little mustard seed – can empower us and enable us to move mountains for Jesus.

As I pondered those books about fear in the light of this Bible story, I realized that the ideas are not mutually exclusive. To have fear is completely normal and it can certainly help us to identify danger or threats in violent situations, but when we focus too much on our fears, and turn our eyes away from trusting God, then we are not able to focus on the love of Christ or the hand of God leading us through a storm. We begin to sink. As Alistair preached last week, it is important for us as Christians to maintain hope that God is good and will work everything out for good in his time. And as Caro preached two weeks ago, we should never give up our prayers. Even when we feel lost and alone, even if we don't believe that anyone up there or out there is listening - we should still hope for the best and call out for God's help.

Because he is sure to be there to catch up as we fall.

If the Psalmist is right, God will not only reach out and catch us, but he will set us high on a rock of protection in our days of trouble.

And if the apostle John was right, the perfect love of God will cast out our fears and make us bold in our faith, in our actions, and in our love of God, ourselves and others.

May we be the church to keep hoping, keep calling out, keep trusting God when we fall and when we fail, and keep growing in boldness and love until all may know and believe that God is Lord, God is good and God is waiting to perform his miracles in our lives and the lives of those around us. Amen?

Let us pray:

Holy, holy, holy Lord- we give thanks and praise to you that you are always there to answer us immediately when we call out to you. God, let us place all of our hurts, our doubts and our fears on your altar this morning. Let us leave them here for you, and being lighter and more joyful, let us place ourselves into your kind and gentle hands and into your service as you, too, call out to us the way in which you would have us to go. Amen.