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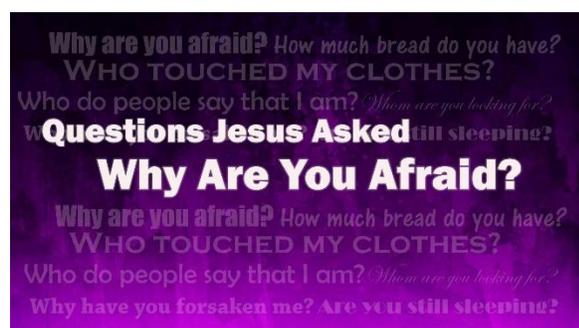
Title: Why Are You Afraid?

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Text: [Mark 4:35-41](#)

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The Gospels record Jesus asking three hundred and seventy questions. As Promise Road Campus Lead Pastor, Danny Gulden, and I began to think about leading our congregation toward Easter this year, we wondered, “what if some of the greatest teachings of Jesus came through the questions he asked?”

As we journey through Lent to Easter,

we will explore some of Jesus’ questions by looking at how people responded and what that means for us today. We begin that journey today with Jesus’ question – “why are you afraid?”

Before we begin, I want you to do a little self-inventory – not out loud – just in your head. Think about what moves the fear meter for you. I did a little research and discovered the top ten fears in the US according to the National Institute for Mental Health.¹ See if one or more of these describe your fears?

Top on the list is arachnophobia – the fear of arachnids – SPIDERS. If it helps any, while there are about 35,000 different species of spiders, only about a dozen pose any kind of threat to humans. My problem is that I can’t distinguish between the 34,988 that won’t hurt me and the 12 that will.

Snakes are second on the list which doesn’t make sense because tigers and bears don’t crack the top ten and I’d much rather meet a snake than a tiger or bear. Number three is mine – acrophobia – the fear of heights. I’m OK three steps up on a six-foot ladder but don’t ask me to get on anything higher. A few years ago when this sanctuary was being reroofed, I literally could not watch the workers without feeling sick to my stomach.

The rest of the top ten is composed of: #4 - flying, #5 – dogs, #6 – well I’ll come back to this in a minute because it applies to our story today, #7 – injections, #8 – social situations, #9 – being alone and, #10 – fear of germs. Do you see yourself anywhere there or do you have to go out of the top ten to hit yours? If I were developing a list, I’d throw out “dogs” and

replace them with “public speaking.” I wonder if the disciples in our story today had number six (I told you I’d get back to it) – astraphobia – the fear of thunder and lightning specifically and storms in general.

Our first question in this series – “why are you afraid?” comes from the familiar story of Jesus calming the sea. It's a story we tell our children to give them a sense of the power that Jesus has. While that is true, that may not be the point of the story for Mark. The recounting of this event is found in all three synoptic gospels – Matthew and Luke, both in the 8th chapters, and Mark in the 4th chapter – shocking (not really) that Mark gets to it quicker than his synoptic counterparts.

Jesus is on a boat with his disciples. After a day’s preaching, Jesus falls asleep (on a cushion, Mark says – a curious detail for Mark). Then a huge, unexpected storm blows up around the boat. This happens yet today in the rugged country to the northeast of the sea of Galilee, what today we call the Golan Heights. In that broken, torn terrain, it is easy for the winds to gather and suddenly to break out upon the sea. Under these conditions, a violent and raging storm can arise in just a few moments. As these disciples set out in the calm of the evening to cross to the eastern shore, this storm broke out. Within moments the sea was frothing, waves mounting up.

When I was 18, a little tornado, not even detectable on the radar – at least the radars they had in 1978, came up out of nowhere and hit a little tourist boat on a state park lake only a few miles from my home. The boat was called the Whippoorwill and 16 of the 58 people on board were killed. To this day, it remains the deadliest F1 tornado on record and has come to be known as the Whippoorwill tornado.² The only inkling of danger was a severe thunderstorm watch for the next county over. It doesn’t stretch my imagination at all to understand how such a thing can happen.

It was a great wind, Mark says. Within minutes, they found themselves amid this tremendous, raging storm, the boat filling rapidly as water came dashing over the bow. The disciples panicked! Many knew their way around boats and lakes and especially this lake so they had a point of reference. They knew this storm was greater than anything they had seen before. They feared they were going to die. So they came and woke Jesus, asking, “Teacher, do you not care that we perish?” (Mark 4:38b).

Jesus then asks them our question of the day, “Why are you afraid?” This seems to me a rather ridiculous question. Wasn’t it obvious why they were afraid? But he still asks them why they are afraid. To me, their fear seemed completely rational – they were facing death by shipwreck or drowning.

Jesus does two things – he deals with the storm and he deals with the disciples. He commands the storm in the same way he commanded the demons that we talked about a couple of weeks ago earlier in Mark. He commands the storm with the words, "Peace, be still!" and the wind ceased. By calming the storm, Jesus gives them a glimpse of who he is. The significance of the storm pales in comparison to the significance of who Jesus is.

Then, he deals with the disciples. In addition to asking why they are afraid, he asks them another, more pointed, question. "Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40b). With the rescue accomplished and the sea calm, now is the time for some remedial disciple instruction. Like with the parables, now Jesus moves to "interpret" this "parable" for disciples whose capacities are weak without the gift of Jesus' presence and care.

The care of Jesus has already been demonstrated. He calmed the storm with the sound of his voice. Apparently, according to the reading of the story from the perspective of Jesus, this storm wasn't going to kill them. Reading it this way, he didn't save them from the storm – that would have happened anyway. What he saved them from is their fear. So maybe, just maybe, this story is more about fear than just a run-of-the-mill miracle of calming the sea.

Jesus says it's time to go to the other side. The other side always strikes fear in us. The other side is almost always a scary or undesirable place, or at least we think it is. The "other side" of the tracks, the "other side" of the aisle, the "other side" of the sea. There's always a boundary we're taught not to cross. We're taught the boundary is there for a reason: for our protection, for our privilege, for our purity. It's a wall, a fence, a law, an attitude, or a demonic sea.

In Mark, the sea is a metaphor for the chaotic forces that stand against the Kingdom of God spreading throughout the region. It's a boundary, literal and metaphor, between Jew and Gentile. Though this sea is a threat to them and their message, Jesus wants to cross it because the Good News of the Gospel is never for those on just one side of the sea.

Just a chapter earlier, when he commissions the disciples and took the number from four to twelve, he gives THEM the power to cast out demons. THEY had the power to rebuke the demons that stir up the wind and waves. They just didn't have the faith to do it because their fear paralyzed them.

I resonated with a story told in some of my readings this week because my story is almost identical.³ My mother taught me how to do laundry. She showed me how to sort my clothes (although I'm not sure I get that part even today). She taught me how to use the washing machine and what the settings were for the dryer. One week, in high school, I noticed my laundry was piling up and I finally said to her - "Mom, I need my clothes washed."

Her reply was shocking - "Okay, go wash them." So, I did the smell test on a few tee-shirts and thought I could last a bit longer, at least until Saturday when my mom would be home all day and not have to work. On Saturday, during commercial breaks of watching TV, I said, "Mom, I'm going to need some clean clothes for church tomorrow." My high school psychology class told me that would get her to do my laundry, throw in the whole "can't-go-to-church-without-clean-clothes" bit.

Again, a shocking reply - "Okay, well the washing machine is free." I didn't want to do my laundry. I wanted my mom to do my laundry. Maybe I was scared I'd ruin my clothes. Maybe I didn't trust I knew what I was doing. Maybe I just didn't want to have to do it myself when there was someone else perfectly capable of doing a good job of it. "But you're my mother. You're supposed to do my laundry for me." She said, "No, I'm your mother. I'm supposed to teach you how to do your laundry because I won't always be here to do it for you."

The disciples had been commissioned and taught by Jesus himself to cast out demons but they cannot or will not rebuke the wind and the waves of the demonic sea. They don't even try? They're too busy calming themselves to calm the storm. They're too busy casting out the water in their boat to cast out the demons around it. Jesus calls the disciples to follow him, which means he believes they have what it takes to be like him. He gives them the power to proclaim the good news, to cast out demons, and to heal every kind of disease and sickness. He even tells them at one point that the gates of hell cannot overcome them, but they are still afraid.

We are given the power to cast out demons, but we stand trembling in their midst instead of rebuking them. We stand on the shore, fearing the storm that's sure to brew if we try to cross to the other side with the love of God. Why? Because "those" people on "that" side are not worthy or deserving of the love of Christ, or they're different from us, or it's too dangerous or so we're led to believe. Will we weather the storm if we try to cross that boundary? Maybe it's just best to stay on dry land. We of little faith, why are we so afraid?

We don't believe we have the power to stand above the forces of prejudice, hatred, bigotry, violence, abuse, and terror. So we do not stand. We do not rebuke. Instead, we huddle down in the bottom of our boats and watch the squall through stained glass. What else can we do? "We're just disciples in a boat," we say. We follow. We worship and we sing and pray. That's all. He chose us for this, to be his church: his singing, praying, and preaching church. If a storm comes up that keeps us from going to the other side, well, then it's up to Jesus to calm that storm if that's where he wants us to go."

That's not faith! Jesus doesn't call his disciples to merely follow. He calls them to lead, to heal, to proclaim, and to cast out. He asks them to have faith in the power he promises and the work he commissions them to do for the Kingdom of God, whether that is spreading some seed and letting the power of God go to work while they sleep, or rebuking demons and watching the power of God go to work while he sleeps. Faith is trusting the power of God is always at work, in Christ, in the church, and you.

Christ calls and commissions the church to be exorcists and healers. Is there discrimination? Cast it out. Is there division? Heal it. Are there painful words? Rebuke them. Are there broken hearts? Bind them. Are there storms that would keep us from proclaiming that nothing can separate us from the love of God? Silence them. "But isn't that Jesus' job? What's he doing while all this hurt and pain and division is happening? If he wants us to go to the other side, he ought to make sure we can get there! Is he asleep? He should calm things down. Why is he silent in the midst of this storm? Why won't he do anything?"

There's a comic strip called *B.C.* that chronicles the humorous everyday lives of two cavemen, because what else would cavemen's lives be if not humorous? A few years ago, there was a strip in which two cavemen are sitting together under the night sky, when one says, "Sometimes I want to ask God why God lets so many bad things happen in the world." The other asks, "Why don't you?" The reply, "Because I'm afraid God would ask me the same question."

In Jesus' questions, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" the disciples in the story, and we as its hearers today, are called to face our fears. I'm not suggesting that I need to go to the peak of this roof and face my fear of heights or if you are number one on the list with spiders that you let spiders crawl on you to face your fear. Those things don't matter. What matters is what holds you back from becoming what God intends for you. You see, the problem with fear is that we focus so much on the fear, and we lose sight of Jesus and what he has the power to do in us and through us.

At the end of today's story, Mark tells us that the disciples were filled with great awe (which means "great fear") and they ask "Who then is this?" When God comes among us, how will we respond to that question? Who is Jesus for us? The answer informs and defines our entire faith journey.

Like a good teacher, Jesus often doesn't answer questions directly but answers with a question. Today is our first. "Why are you afraid?" As we look at questions Jesus asked over this season of Lent, there is time for the answers to mature as we make our journey to the cross and the empty tomb. Perhaps in the shaping of that journey, the power and presence of the good news of Jesus will shape your lives in the crucial turn from fear to faith.

¹ List found at www.verywellmind.com. 10 of the Most Common Phobias.

² Information from Wikipedia article, "1978 Whippoorwill Tornado."

³ This story and later B.C. comic strip illustration from a sermon by Stephen McKinney-Whitaker, June 21, 2015, "We of Little Faith" found at www.day1.org.