

"Into the Wave,"

12 June 2005

Bible passage: **Mark 6:45-50** (*The Message*)

As soon as the meal was finished, Jesus insisted that the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead across to Bethsaida while he dismissed the congregation. After sending them off, he climbed a mountain to pray.

Late at night, the boat was far out at sea, Jesus was still by himself on land. He could see his men struggling with the oars, the wind having come up against them. At about four o'clock in the morning, Jesus came toward them, walking on the sea. He intended to go right by them. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and screamed, scared out of their wits.

Jesus was quick to comfort them: "Courage! It's me. Don't be afraid." As soon as he climbed into the boat, the wind died down. They were stunned, shaking their heads, wondering what was going on. They didn't understand what he had done at the supper. None of this had yet penetrated their hearts.

The title for this morning actually came from something that occurred as the tsunami was hitting part of Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and many other countries. We've all seen the footage and have witnessed the terror that the beach lovers experienced as this giant killer wave overtook hundreds of thousands of people, drowning out their lives.

Apparently, one fisherman looked fear in the face. He had his family on his boat, and when he saw the wave, he did what any boater knows to do—he turned his boat into the wave, and rode over the top of it to eventual safety. Surely that was a frightening time for them on the boat, but they turned toward that fearsome thing, and overcame it to tell the story.

It seems to me that there's a good lesson in this story for all of us, and that lesson is the importance of learning to deal with our fears in a life-giving, rather than life-depleting, way. And that's what we're talking about today.

We probably all have some stories about times that we've been overwhelmed and even paralyzed with fear. It often occurs when we're children. We're afraid of the dark, and imagine all kinds of monsters lurking under the bed or just outside our windows. How many times have we tried to sleep out in the back yard in a tent, only to make a beeline for the safety of our houses as soon as the slightest sound was heard? I suspect that most of us have shied away from something we considered just too scary or risky; that just seems to be a part of the way you and I are hard-wired.

The list of our fears can be extensive. After all, most of us have our fair share of phobias. One of the Garden Kids Lead Team members gave me a page-long list of various phobias—29 in all, and some I've never heard of. Sure, there are some common ones, like claustrophobia—the fear of enclosed spaces, or hydrophobia—the fear of water. But the list contains other phobias, such as agoraphobia (open spaces), astraphobia (thunder and lightning), autophobia (being alone), dromophobia (crossing streets), musophobia (mice), and there are lots more. Maybe I've named some of ours, and maybe not, but trust me, if we're afraid of something, there's a phobia of some sort that describes it!

I don't know exactly what term would explain what happened to some Lithuanian teachers who visited the United States after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Paula Reinhart talks about their experience in her book *Strong Women, Soft Hearts*. A few generous Texans offered a group of teachers from that country the opportunity to come to this country to relax at a retreat center for a few weeks. These teachers had never been out of their country, and many had not been more than thirty miles from the government apartment building in which they lived.

We can only begin to imagine the excitement of these women, for this was a dream come true. They flew halfway around the world to a land far different from the one they had left, and they could explore to their hearts' content, no restrictions applied. As the time progressed, however, an unusual situation developed, and no one quite understood what was going on. Two of the women never left their rooms; they remained in their little room for the entire time, too afraid to venture out. Apparently, they were so fearful that they became totally paralyzed. They were afraid of what they didn't know—of the unknown.

That seems to me to be some of what's going on in our Bible passage for today. This story is found in Mark's gospel, one of the early writings of the story of Jesus. Scholars are in disagreement about what's going on here, and many studies have focused on the so-called miracle of Jesus walking on the water. There are artistic renderings that have made that story famous, but that isn't where I want us to focus today.

First, let me give you a bit of background to the story. It's placed in the gospel of Mark right after Jesus feeds 5,000 people, but some theologians believe that it is actually a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus that was put here by the writer to try to point out the divinity of Jesus. Even if it weren't a post-resurrection story, there are other conjectures as to what might have happened—the boat blown off course, and actually heading toward where Jesus was, Jesus walking in the surf of the sea could appear to be walking on water, etc.

Whatever explanation we try to offer is not the point, but there are a couple of key phrases that lead us toward what I believe to be the real issue. One occurred when they saw Jesus coming toward them. Our Bible passage says, "But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and screamed, scared out of their wits." Jesus identified the problem right away, and said to them, "Courage! It's me. Don't be afraid." And then we read, "They were stunned, shaking their heads, wondering what was going on. They didn't understand what he had done at the supper. None of this had penetrated their hearts." Because the disciples didn't understand what was going on, they were afraid.

It seems to me that the disciples were experiencing pretty much the same thing the Lithuanian women went through—a fear of the unknown, of the not-yet-understood. I would guess that is the same kind of fear many of us experience, too. We're often afraid of the future, wondering what it will hold for us. We're afraid to try a new thing, because we don't understand it. We're reluctant to venture into new territory, because we're afraid of what might be there.

Many of us live our lives totally dominated by fear, but there's a basic problem with that. Writer Sue Monk-Kidd quotes a saying from the movie *Strictly Ballroom* and says about fear, "A life lived in fear is a life half-lived." The famous speaker Zig Ziglar says, "Fear is the darkroom where

negatives are developed." How right he is. Our fears, whether involved and deep or whether quite simple, have a way of short-circuiting our lives and cause us to only live half a life.

If that's where we find ourselves, what are we to do? It may not be easy, but it seems to me that the starting point is wanting our lives to be different, and to make a conscious decision to live a less fear-filled life. That means that, like that fisherman facing the height of the tsunami, we have to turn into the wave; we have to face our fears head-on and disarm them.

In so many ways, it's like the classic *Wizard of Oz*. Once we pull back the curtain, we see the thing we fear for what it is, we discover that there's really no cause to be so frightened. The reality is usually much less threatening than our fears of what might be.

Sometimes we may have to be intentional about changing the way we think about our fear. Ron Jensen, in his book *Make a Life, Not Just a Living*, talked about their daughter Molly who went through a time when she became extremely fearful for her parents to be away from her. Molly's fear became so great that it seemed to overwhelm her, so her parents had to resort to some creative thinking to try to help her deal with the fear that was consuming her.

They wanted to find a way for her to change her thinking and reject or overcome this fear that she had. They worked with her to help her identify the fear, and to describe what was going on in her when she experienced this fear. Then they came up with something for her to think or say when she began to recognize that fear coming on her. Together they decided that whenever she felt that fearful feeling, she was to jump up and say, "Hallelujah! My feet don't stink!" When she did that, inevitably she started to laugh. The effort paid off, and it worked because when her parents realized that doing something as simple as changing the way we stand or speak can totally change our state of mind. Maybe you and I, when our fears seem to control us, can jump up and say, "Hallelujah! My feet don't stink!" Or maybe something a little less ludicrous...

There's yet another thing, and probably the most important thing, that can help us face our fears, and that's faith. A few weeks ago, we talked about one verse of the 23rd Psalm and that, "Even though I walk through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, God, for you are with me." In today's Bible passage, the fear the disciples faced seemed to lessen when Jesus said to them, "Courage! It's me. Don't be afraid."

The reality is that we are not alone; God is always with us, and God's loving presence can fill us with the courage and hope we need to turn to face our fears, knowing that whatever happens, it will be OK, because we are not by ourselves.

Sharon Salzberg wrote an article about six months after 9/11 in which she talked about the ongoing tension and fear that many people were experiencing—fear of powerlessness, fear of loss of control, fear of loss of loved ones, fear of our loss of security, and the list goes on. She talked about the role of faith in facing our fears, and said, "Faith is willing to engage the unknown, not shrink back from it. Faith doesn't mean the absence of fear. It means having the energy to go ahead, right alongside the fear."

I think she's exactly right. It's probably unrealistic to think that we're never going to experience fear again, but our faith is what gives us the courage to keep moving, to turn toward our fears, and walk right alongside them.

CLOSING:

In her book *Seeking With All My Heart*, author Paula D'Arcy recalled an experience she had when she was meeting with children and young teens in Lithuania. Her friend Juan spoke to the kids

one day with these words, "You choose each day whether or not your life will be given over to fear." He could also say the same thing to us, because we do indeed choose each day how we'll live our lives—in fear, or in faith. I hope and pray that we live in faith.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.