

FEAR AND FAITH

Mark 4:35-41

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

June 23, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 4, verses 35 through 41. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us whom we should fear. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 4, beginning at verse 35, we read in Jesus' name.

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. ³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

What do you fear? And what do you trust?

One of the obvious top fears is death. A lot of people fear death a lot. And I suppose everyone fears it at least a little bit. Supposedly, many people fear public speaking even more than death. I don't know if that's true or not. I suppose the real fear is that people might see us for who we are. People will listen to and judge our words. Our ignorance might be exposed. Some people fear spiders or snakes or some other creepy animal. Some people are afraid of the dark. It's not really the darkness, though, that frightens us, but whatever there might be in the darkness that we cannot see. It's a fear of the unknown. In a similar way, we might fear the future. That's a big unknown. We might fear not having enough when we get to retirement, because we never really know how long we will live, and we don't know what inflation or some other future threat might do to our savings. It's kind of weird; we might actually fear living too long. We might live so long that we run out of money, and then we become homeless or hungry, and we die, because we lived too long. We might fear failing in school or in sports. We might fear being rejected by the cool kids. We might be afraid that we will experience some illness that will severely alter the course of our lives. We might fear the government, that they will cancel our benefits or revoke our freedoms. We might fear the weather. It could be a severe storm, a flood, a drought, or climate change. We might fear that our cars or something in our homes will breakdown. Or we might fear that the people we depend on will abandon us. There might be some secret sin or a character flaw we have, and we fear that it will be exposed. That's a long list of fears, but it's barely scratching the surface. I have no idea whether or not I've mentioned your greatest fear.

We fear many things. But in this gospel lesson, we learn what, or I should say, *whom* we should really fear. We should fear God alone. At first, Jesus' disciples are afraid of one thing: the storm. But in the end, they have found something bigger to fear: Jesus.

We go through life, often, with no thought for God. We go about our daily activities, giving little or no thought to his constant presence with us. How much different our lives would be if we did give a care. Perhaps we would be more obedient to God's commands and more loving toward our neighbors. We would have a greater fear of God, but also less fear of everything else, so we would live with much more joy. But, as it is, we give little thought for God. When something good happens, we think, *Good for me!* When something bad happens, *Woe is me!* And when some unexpected danger presents itself, we become frightened. But what if God made his presence known to us, like he did to those disciples in that boat.

It's the same thing that happened to Job in the Old Testament lesson (Job 38:1-11). These two readings are about as good of an Old Testament and Gospel lesson combination as you'll ever see. In both lessons, God's people come to an immediate understanding of who God is, and not only that, but that he is right in front of them, talking to them, and it terrifies them.

For Job, his experience comes after thirty-five chapters of him complaining about God and his friends giving him bad advice. Then, and I suppose this was quite unexpected, the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me" (38:2-3). That's the Old Testament way of saying, "Put your man pants on, Job. We're going to have a talk." The LORD does all the talking, and by the end of it, the only thing Job can do is confess his sin, and confess that the LORD is God.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus revealed his divine power, and the disciples learned whom they should really fear.

This passage is sometimes misunderstood. It goes like this: "Jesus can calm the storms in your life." The idea is that Jesus can make the bad times go away, or at least help us get through them safely. Now that's not totally untrue. Jesus can calm the storms of our life. But he doesn't always do it. And I wonder what Job would have said if his friends had said to him, "God can calm the storms of your life." He probably would have said, "Yeah; I know. So why doesn't he?" And when we encounter people who are experiencing great suffering and sorrow, it just doesn't work to say, "Jesus can calm the storms of your life." *What if he doesn't? And if Jesus doesn't calm the storms in my life, what does that mean? Does it mean that God doesn't love me? Does it mean that God is still angry with me?* This teaching, which sounds comforting at first, can actually lead to great despair.

And furthermore, it's just not the point of this text. The basic point is that Jesus is really powerful. That's the very simple point of this text, and when you stop to think about it, it's really obvious. Jesus is powerful. He is so powerful that even the wind and the sea obey him (Mark 4:40). Inanimate objects that are just driven by the physics of the world are subject to the authority of Jesus. He speaks, and they obey. That's power. And that is the simple point of this passage. Jesus is really, really powerful. We can say more, and we will, but the simple and central point is that Jesus is really, really powerful.

Now let's take a closer look. Jesus is in a boat with his disciples. Paint this picture in your mind. The boat is probably a fishing boat, just big enough to hold all thirteen of them. Imagine

being in a boat that size when the waves start coming up over the side. I've been in a canoe with some kind of big white caps. That's a little bit scary, especially if you get turned sideways.

But imagine being in the fishing boat, and the waves are a few *feet* high. That would take a lot of wind. And you're out in the middle of a big lake at night. That would be terrifying. The disciples believed they were perishing; that's what the text says (4:38). But Jesus is sleeping in the back of the boat. The boat's being tossed around by the storm, and the disciples are probably screaming at each other as they try to bail water. They must be soaking wet from the waves, but Jesus is just sleeping. That's probably a miracle in itself. But the disciples could use some help, so they wake Jesus up and say, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (4:38). And I'm not really sure what the disciples thought Jesus was going to do. I don't really think they were expecting a miracle, because when everything is said and done, they don't act like they expected one. They probably just wanted some help bailing water. But Jesus helps by talking to the weather. "He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, '**Peace! Be still!**'" (4:39). Now who does that? The only kind of people who talk to the weather are lunatics, jokesters, and God. But the wind and the sea actually obey. The sea obeys the voice of God.

We also heard this in Job. God asks, "Who shut in the sea with doors ... and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed'?" (Job 38:11). At creation, the LORD separated the land and the sea by his powerful Word. And in the Gospel lesson, that same LORD, Jesus of Nazareth, rebukes the wind and the sea. And they actually obey. "The wind ceased, and there was a great calm" (4:39).

This is kind of eerie. I want you to imagine this. What would happen if, during a great windstorm, the wind suddenly stopped? The waves would keep going for a bit. Water needs some time to settle down. You see this when motorboats speed around a lake. Their waves travel all the way to the shore. Big waves might go on for miles. Now if the wind is kicking up waves that are a few feet high, and the wind suddenly stops, the waves are going to keep going for quite some time. But that's not what happened when Jesus calmed the storm. He rebuked the wind *and* the sea, and they both ceased. This is kind of eerie. But the disciples were more than just a little bit spooked. It says, "They were filled with great fear" (4:41). And this is important. If you have the text in front of you, look at it. At what point were the disciples most afraid? Consider this question: *When were the disciples most afraid?* This might be the most important detail to notice in this text. It wasn't during the storm. Jesus rebuked them for being afraid of the storm, so we know they were afraid, but they were filled with a *great fear after* Jesus calmed the storm.

Why would they be afraid *after* the storm ceased? It's because they realized that something far more powerful than a deadly storm was sitting in their boat. That same powerful force that spoke to the sea in creation and answered Job from the whirlwind was sitting in their boat.

So this account of Jesus calming the storm isn't so much about driving away our fear. Instead, it's about redirecting our fear. Jesus is teaching them, and us too, whom we should really fear.

As Christians, we should always be learning. And even though I am your pastor, I hope that I am still learning. One of the things I have learned since I came here is a better understanding of what it means to fear God. At one time I kind of thought, *Well, God doesn't want us to be terrified of him, so fear of God must simply mean respect. We should have a reverence for God, but not actually experience any real fear.* That's what I thought, but I was wrong. I can recall several conversations we've had in the adult Sunday school class, talking about the fear of God or how God is the only one who is truly awesome. And some of you have helped me understand

that it's more than just respect or reverence. If that's all God wanted, he could have just commanded us to respect him. But, no; he commands us to fear him.

Now, I'm not saying that we should live in constant terror of God. But we should have a healthy fear of him. And that includes a little bit of terror from time to time. We're talking about the God who created heaven and earth. He commands the wind and the sea, and they obey. There are times when he rebukes his disciples and reduces them to nothing. I'm not saying we should live in constant terror, but if we never experience any fear or trembling, we are probably not thinking about God rightly, if we are even thinking of him at all.

It's a little bit like a thunderstorm. This won't be a perfect illustration, but I think it will help a little bit. I don't know about you, but I like thunderstorms. And I know that thunderstorms can be extremely dangerous. You don't want to get caught in the open. But if you have some shelter, the power of the storm is exciting. It's fun to sit on a covered porch, so you don't get wet, see the driving wind—it's even better if there's hail, see the flashes of lightning and hear and feel the crashes of thunder. Being safe doesn't erase the healthy fear.

Now try to imagine what would happen if God appeared in physical form to us right now. What would he call you to account for? In what ways have you carelessly stepped out of the shelter of his Word? What commandments or doctrines have you decided not to keep? What has God spoken that you think is insignificant or outdated? Do you ever say, "Times are changing," or, "Nobody really lives that way anymore"? If Jesus were standing in front of you, would you dare to say those things to him? Would you say to him, "I don't want to get tangled up in secondary doctrines"? I promise you: that would not fly. We would not dare to say such things to God's face. We would be terrified because of all those times we thought some sin just wasn't that big of a deal. And we would deeply regret every time we didn't take his word seriously. It is right to fear God, because whether we see him or not, he is constantly present with us. We should fear God above all things. Jesus even says, **"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell"** (Matt. 10:28). And by that, he meant God.

We should fear God. But not only that, we should also trust him. Fear and faith are not really so different. Fear and faith are really just opposite sides of the same coin. When we fear something, we acknowledge its power to destroy us. When we trust something, we acknowledge its power to save us. So whatever we fear the most, that is truly our god. Whenever we ascribe to someone or something the power to destroy or to save, that becomes our god.

In our culture today, I see a great fear of government. We ascribe to its power to make our lives great or terrible. And it's mostly fear. For example, if your great fear is that the wrong candidate will be elected in November, that person is your god. Do you really want that person to be your god? Stop fearing him. Fear the one true God, who is sovereign over all things. And trust in him.

Among young people, especially, there is a great fear of what other people think of us. This has always been the case with adolescents and young adults, but social media has multiplied this fear exponentially, because it's just constant judgment or validation. It leads to great anxiety and depression. Stop caring what they think. They're not God. They're all just as vulnerable as you are. They can neither save you nor destroy you. That power belongs to the one true God. Fear him.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 110:10; Prov. 9:10). And faith is simply recognizing that the one we fear is not against us, but for us.

FEAR AND FAITH (Mark 4:35-41)

So the disciples were terrified when they realized who was with them in the boat. And a bit of that fear always remained, but they learned that Jesus was not there to destroy them, but to save them.

He came, not merely to save them from that storm, but to save them and us from death. His ultimate mission was to be crucified for the sins of the world. So he surrendered himself to the will of evil men. He allowed them to crucify him to death on a cross. By his death he swallowed up sin and death for all time. And he rose bodily from the grave. He entered into new life, and he promises that new life to all who call upon him. By his death and resurrection, he calmed the raging storm of sin and death for all who trust in him.

The disciples ask, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (4:41). This Jesus is the God of heaven and earth who has come down to save us. We fear him because of his power and justice. And we trust him because of his power and mercy. When we fear and trust in God, we have nothing else to fear, because “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31), and Jesus is most certainly for us. The storms of life, whether they’re literal storms or metaphorical, are still just as stormy as ever. And they might overtake us. When you get sick, you might die. That’s the truth. But if the God who calmed the storm and passed through death is for us, then we have nothing to fear, not even death, because this Jesus raises the dead by the same word he used to calm the storm.

So fear Jesus, for there is no greater power. And trust in Jesus, for there is no one more merciful. He is your Savior. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.