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## *What Are You Afraid Of?*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell**  
**The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 7, Year B**

What is it that you're afraid of? Have you ever noticed that when things upset us, we often think that something is wrong? This is particularly true, I think, in the case of fear. We devote a tremendous amount of energy to dealing with our fears. Fear motivates how we act and react, how we talk and what we wear, sometimes even who we'll hang around with, and who we won't. But fear can make our life narrow and shallow and dark. It blocks intimacy. It leads us into conflict. It traps us in sadness, and perhaps most importantly, fear can disconnect us from God. I think we struggle with our fears, because they're physically and emotionally uncomfortable. As the theologian Woody Allen put it: "I don't like to be afraid. It scares me."

We dislike discomfort that our fears generate so much that we'll go to great lengths to avoid it. Yet, many of our efforts to rid ourselves of these fears only seem to strengthen them, and the stronger they become, the more they rule over our lives. So, back to my question, what is it that you're afraid of? I want you to take a moment, and pick something or two things. Be gentle with yourself, maybe a fear that you already suspect you shouldn't have, and then attach an image to it, something that represents that fear, something that will allow you to remember it, at least for the rest of this sermon. I want you to keep this image in your mind as we look at Mark's story about Jesus rescuing the disciples from the stormy sea.

On the face of it, this story is about Jesus bringing the wind and waves to heel. These are powers that are reserved in the Hebrew scriptures for God alone. So, after the disciples wake Jesus from his sleep, he calls out, "Peace. Be still." The wind stops. The sea calms. The disciples recognize that Jesus is the Son of God, and then Jesus gently rebukes them for not having had faith in him before. But if we think about this story, we know that it can't mean that we're never going to have pain. It can't mean that if we're faithful, we're never going to suffer. It can't mean that believing in Jesus means that we will always be rescued from the discomfort of our fears.

If we look again at the story, we'll begin to see that it's not just about rescuing the disciples. It's also about teaching the disciples about their fears. It's about Jesus liberating the disciples from the tyranny of their fears. Listen to the tone and the three exchanges between Jesus and the disciples. When the disciples wake Jesus, who is sleeping calmly and serenely in the back of the boat, while they are in the bow with the waves beating against the boat, and swamping it, the tone is that of desperation. It is a desperate cry that says, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? Do you not care about us? Do you not care that we're perishing?"

They're worried more, I think, than just about dying in the storm. They're worried about Jesus abandoning them in a time of crisis. It's not just survival that they want. They want Jesus to be with them there in their fear and in their uncertainty. When Jesus responds, "Peace. Be still," he's not talking just to the waves and the wind. He is also, I think, talking to the disciples. Something that we might say would be, "Breathe. Recenter. Calm down." You are in a reactive, panic-stricken desperate mode to respond to the situation in front of you. You need to be still. You need to experience some peace. When Jesus says, "Why were you afraid? Have you still no faith?" He is, I think, asking the disciples to pay attention to their fears, to acknowledge them, be aware of them, and notice how they are reacting to them, and notice how their reactions are making it more difficult for them to trust in God.

When they are reacting, it's hard to respond. The disciples desire a God who rescues them from the obstacles in their path. They want to be safe like children want to be safe. They want a God who's a powerful, protective parent. Jesus is responding, in effect, "I know that your fear is uncomfortable for you, and that you don't like it, but you need to see that it is your path. What you are afraid of is your path to growing in faith, your path to learning to trust God."

Now, many of our personality strategies are motivated one way or another by fear. We worry, without knowing why, that one day there won't be enough, or that we will lose those things that we value, or that we will run out of those things that we need.

Sometimes, I think our strongest fear is fear of fear itself, and our instinct naturally is to get rid of these fears, to push them away, to deny them, to conquer them in order to gain more control over our lives. But the paradox here is that the harder we struggle to gain control over our lives, the more we feel disconnected from God. The harder we struggle to control our fears, the less we allow God to be part of our lives. Now, it's not hard to understand why we don't like fear. It is a physical sensation that's real, but it often causes suffering because it is premised on some belief we have about ourselves. That's probably not true, at least in full, or the consequences of something we've done that probably won't actually pan out the way that we think.

Do you remember your image of what you were afraid of? Does it have anything to do with losing safety or control? Does it have anything to do with abandonment, or loss, or death? Does it have anything to do with unworthiness? All of these fears, they're just being human. If your fears fall into one of these categories, welcome to the human race. We all have fears in these categories. You are not alone.

Cynthia Bourgeault tells a story about how she learned to deal with fear. It's a story about sailing in Maine. Now, if you've ever sailed in Maine, you know that one of the challenges is fog. Fog can roll in as unexpectedly as storms on the sea of Galilee, and that fog can be so thick as to make it impossible to see like nighttime on the sea of Galilee. Cynthia was preparing to sail with a publisher named Hank Taft of the Taft family.

He was a publisher and an outdoor enthusiast. He fished and kayaked and sailed and hiked and camped and tracked with great vigor. So, it was a surprise to everyone when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but he responded as an outdoor enthusiast might by doubling down on his exercise regimen, by being even more disciplined in his diet, by taking up meditation, which had never occurred to him before, and by limiting his chemotherapy so that he would have the energy to do these other things. Early one morning, Bourgeault was talking to Hank about his plans for the upcoming season. When the conversation shifted to the subject of fog, Hank was telling Cynthia Bourgeault about how he dealt with fog, all of the things he could do to keep his mind off the fear that being on a sailboat in the middle of a fog bank generated.

He kept precise time checks that he wrote down in the log. He stood out on the bow, and every 30 seconds did a full and complete scan of the water around him. He watched for minute changes in the ripple pattern so that he could detect if anything was near. He located himself by noticing the familiarity of passing lobster buoys. It seemed clear to Bourgeault that this list would be never ending when she found herself bursting out and saying, "Yes, or else, you could just let your fear come up, and fall to the other side." Hank looked at her, she said, as if she had just pierced him in the side with a spear, and she immediately regretted what she had said. But over the next several weeks, Hank made a very intentional turn. He turned inward.

He stopped his exercise routine. He relaxed his diet. He even wavered a bit on his meditations. He gathered his family around him. He settled his affairs, and he went home to wait. In those final weeks, though, all who were around, Hank noticed a change. As he was at home waiting, he seemed to gain a luminous quality. It was as if while his body withered, his soul soared. He seemed more present than he had been before, more attentive than they remembered him being. Three days before he died, Bourgeault was sitting by his bedside just absorbing this radiance of his presence. They hugged each other. He said his farewell, and then he whispered something into her ear. His voice was muffled. She had difficulty understanding what he said, and then she discerned what it was.

He was asking a question, "Are you fearless yet?" he said. "Not yet, Hank," she said, "But I'm trying". He looked up at her again, and said, "Fall fearless into love." Bourgeault says that it would take her a full decade to understand what this really meant, and yet somehow in that moment, at that time, she intuitively knew that it was true. There is a force greater than ourselves. She says, "We are made for this, and when we finally yield ourselves to it, we are reborn into a meaning that we would never know if we simply struggled on the surface." Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest. She's talking about God as we understand it. To trust in God is to surrender to God. It is not to get rid of our fears. It is not to sublimate them. It is not to try to conquer them. It is to let them in.

Though to be clear, if you engage in this practice, it won't be long before you'll need somebody by your side, somebody who's helping you as you probe your own self, but it is not our existence, which is at risk. Our existence is temporary. We will die one day. We will have pain. We will have disappointment. Our faith does not give us immunity from those facts of life, but the essence of who we are, the essence who we are will never die. It is God. The essence of who we are is God, and that is what Jesus is asking us to trust. Jesus is asking

us to trust that at our core, we are in essence united with God. So, to let our fears in to ask, "What is this, this bodily sensation? What is this, this belief about myself that is causing this fear to stand apart from it, if you will, knowing it's not really you? It's not your essence."

This is the path of trust that Bourgeault is outlining. "Fall fearless into love," Hank told her. "Fall fearless into love, and you'll know what it means to trust God." Amen.