

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

The Lord over Our Fears

Matthew 14:22-33

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Brad Haugen

22[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee], while he dismissed the crowds. 23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

28Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."



DIAGNOSIS: Ruled by Fear

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Bound to See Ghosts

Before Jesus even walks on the sea toward the disciples, the disciples are sailing against the wind. Their boat is battered by the waves. They are already battling the wind and the waves. For this reason, they cannot see Jesus when he is walking toward them on the sea. They do not recognize him. Gazing through gusts of wind and the spray of the waves as they navigate a rocking boat, they see something that they are unable to recognize. “It can only be a ghost!” they cry out in fear.

This is a fitting metaphor for our tumultuous present moment in history. The intense politicization of everything from a global pandemic and science to racist killings and “law and order” leadership tactics, to reopening the economy and wearing or not wearing masks, has obstructed our vision as a people. Rather than clarity of thought and discerning judgment, the rampant

divisions, polarization, and tribalism among people has made us more suspicious and fearful of each other. We each see what we want to see, and then dismiss what we do not want to see as not real—like ghosts are not real. Especially now, we fear the people who do not think or believe the way we do. They are the ones who are seeing things—ghosts and what have you—not us.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Bound to Fear

No matter how we cast our vote or what we believe is real, we are all internally bound to fear. Like the frightened disciples, our vision during the year 2020 is not 20/20 but rather profoundly affected by what we are afraid of. In his fascinating and helpful analysis of people and the issues that divide them from the standpoint of moral psychology, Jonathan Haidt writes this: “When a group of people make something sacred, the members of the cult lose the ability to think clearly about it. Morality binds and blinds. The true believers produce pious fantasies that don’t match reality, and at some point somebody comes along to knock the idol off its pedestal. That was Hume’s project, with his philosophically sacrilegious claim that reason was nothing but the servant of the passions” (The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion, p. 34). Likewise, in ways we are not even aware of, our fears at this present moment not only divide us from others but also bind us to those who are experiencing the same or similar fears. And we are not going to like to hear this, but those fears can also grow to the point of blinding us, as they have.

Admittedly, healthy, God-given fear can warn us when something is wrong or harmful. By acknowledging the fear and what it may be trying to tell us, we might avoid doing what is wrong or harmful. In the case of Jesus’ own followers, however, we are not talking about healthy, God-given fear but about being terrified instead. When Jesus’ own followers are terrified at

the sight of what they cannot recognize, their fear-turned-terror both binds and blinds them. And the intensity of people's fears, including our own fears at this present moment, does the same.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Bound to Drown

Binding, blinding fear is not finished with us yet, however. Even when we call out to Jesus, as Peter does, fear can and does get the best of us. Jesus' words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" are apparently not enough to keep Peter from sinking. Jesus' invitation to Peter to join him out on the water is apparently not enough to keep Peter from sinking either. "...when [Peter] noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out..." (v. 30).

God may speak to us at one moment, as God spoke to Peter and the disciples. But like them, we are still bound to fear and forget what God said. We are still bound to try and save ourselves from the people and things we are afraid of. We rely on our fears to protect and save us from pandemics, systemic racism, and violence. Bound to our fears, we resort to blaming others, "law and order" leadership tactics, or hiding in silence. God refuses to direct us away from the "strong wind" (the people and things we are afraid of), and allows us to sink, bound to our fears instead. Bound to our fears, we are bound to drown. We sink and drown as we rely on our fears to protect and save us rather than God.

PROGNOSIS: Ruled by Christ



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Catches Hold of Drowning People

Jesus takes our fears seriously but not as seriously as we do. Jesus can see that Peter is frightened as he is sinking. Jesus understands that as far as Peter can tell, the strong wind is more powerful than Jesus is. Jesus knows that Peter fears the wind more than he trusts Jesus. Jesus can hear the fear in Peter's voice as Peter cries out, "Lord, save me!" Lord, save me from what I am most afraid of right now, the wind and waves overpowering me.

However, it is not Peter's fears that protect him from drowning. It is not even what Peter says to Jesus that saves him. Peter has already drowned in the presence of the Lord by fearing the wind more than he trusts Jesus. The disciples have already sunk in the presence of the Lord by mistaking Jesus for a ghost. No, their fears and their crying out to Jesus are not what saves them. Only Jesus' words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," and Jesus reaching out his hand to catch the sinking Peter, are what bring them back to life after they were bound by fear and had drowned.

Jesus, the crucified one, has bound himself to every fear that we have. By his crucifixion and death, he has drowned on account of all our fears. Yet in his promise, "...it is I; do not be afraid," and in reaching out and catching hold of us as we drown in baptism, Jesus binds us to his own resurrection and new life instead. God's surprising love in Christ Jesus catches hold of you. God saves you, despite you having little faith (if any) and a whole lot of fear.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Bound to Trust rather than Fear

When he is most afraid, the sinking Peter cries out to Jesus: "Lord, save me!" The only reason Peter can say that is because Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord over Peter's fears, even as Peter is sinking under the weight of those fears. Jesus himself is battered by the wind and waves and yet is Lord over them; he alone can tread upon the water without sinking.

Peter cannot save himself from what he is afraid of. He sank under the power of his fears while sinking, after all. But since Jesus is there too, Peter can now see the truth that he, Peter, is not lord over his fears. He can only hope that Jesus is. And in that moment of hope, as his fears no longer cloud his vision, Peter can see Jesus reaching out his hand to catch hold of him. As Jesus catches hold of Peter, Peter is no longer bound to fear the wind and waves. He is bound to trust Jesus instead.

After we sink and drown under the weight of our fears, we realize that we are not lord over our fears. It turns out that our survival strategy of politicization is fear-based and cannot save us as a people. We are bound to fear and remain crushed by our fears unless Jesus is Lord over our fears. Since we are not Lord over our fears, we hope that Jesus is: "Lord, save me!" And in the hope that Jesus is Lord, we trust that Jesus can catch

hold of us and save us from having to be afraid. We are bound to trust him rather than to merely survive out of fear.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Bound to Reach Out

We will undoubtedly continue to be afraid in our lives. Some fears are healthy and God-given, after all. However, because Jesus is Lord, Lord over our fears even, fear no longer rules over us. In other words, because we hope and trust in Jesus catching hold of us in our moments of greatest fear, our vision, judgments, and actions are no longer based on fear. Rather than fear and blame and accuse the people with whom we disagree of believing in things that are not real—of “seeing ghosts”—we will recognize that the intense politicization of life right now is really a fear-based survival strategy in which all of us are caught.

Nevertheless, because we trust that Jesus is Lord over your fears and mine, our vision, judgments, and actions reflect that of Jesus for the sake of other people. As we trust that Jesus continually reaches out and catches hold of us in our fear, we draw closer to people in their moments of fear rather than move farther away from them. We each seek to be a helper reaching out, serving, and listening to others; and we welcome others to do the same for us. Jesus did not allow Peter and the disciples’ fear to separate them from him; so we also do not allow politics, pandemics, and racism to separate us from the people that the fearmongers tell us we should be afraid of.