

“Take Heart”
 August 13, 2017
 Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
 Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

They are terrified. Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, to be alone for a moment of peace and quiet, even in the midst of turmoil. While wind and waves are churning up the Galilee, we see him at rest, centered and focused on God, all through the night. But by morning the boat the disciples are on is far out in the sea. The eyes of Jesus are on them though, and he goes to them. Directly. Down the mountain, on to the water, and toward the boat. The water is rolling and the wind is howling and they see him coming towards them. And thinking it's a ghost, they are terrified.

Fear

Fear. What is it? What does its look like to you? What are the things that grip you and keep you up at night? Are you the kind of person who says, "I am not afraid of anything;" or do you say, "I am afraid of everything."

Fears get tucked away in hidden places, places where we keep them locked up. Then they come out at unexpected times and we realize they are still our fears, and they still have us. The disciples are afraid of ghosts, they are afraid of drowning. When Peter boldly steps out the boat and walks toward Jesus, he is suddenly afraid of the wind, and begins to sink down into the water.

Birds in the Basement and a Pastor on the Roof

So, we all have our fears. Maybe it's spiders, or maybe it's snakes, or flying, or public speaking. Some of you may know Joan has a thing with birds. She doesn't like them at all. One day I get a text from her that something is dead on the basement stairs, and she thinks it's a bat. I try to calm her down by suggesting that maybe it's just one of Rebecca's socks. When I get home, I see that it's not a sock, and it's not a bat. It's a bird. I'm not afraid of birds, dead or alive. I don't understand these irrational fears. So I pick it up and take it outside and bury it. So now we are on the search in the basement for any opening to the outside. I plugged all the holes where utility wires came in and carefully checked all the window casements. I made the basement bird-proof. And I reassured Joan this a once in a lifetime occurrence and that it will never happen again. Until a few weeks later when I heard Joan screaming from the basement. She came running up into the kitchen and was visibly shaken. "I think there's another bird in the basement." Sure enough, another bird had been caught by our cat and there it was, dead on the floor. I took it outside and buried it. And then I look up, and "Aha!" they must be getting in through the chimney. But there's probably some kind of cover or screen on the chimney, right? I won't know until I go up there and check. So a day later, when Joan wasn't home, because she would never let me do it, I decided to go up there to see for myself. I used the ten-foot ladder to the lower roof off the back of the parsonage, carrying another stepladder as I climbed. Then using that ladder I climbed up to the upper roof. Once I got up there the incline got steeper, but I climbed on all fours up to the crest of the roof; made my way to the chimney, and I was right, no cover. Birds are flying in, making it all the way down to the furnace and coming out in the basement. I'm a genius. I have solved this problem. Then I looked down, and I froze. And I remembered I have a fear of heights. How am I going to get down? I tried to do the all fours maneuver in reverse but my feet started slipping. This is not good. I am going to fall off this roof and break my neck. So many people are going to be sad and really angry with me. So I did what you'd expect a pastor frozen on a roof would do. I laid on my side in a sort of fetal position and prayed. Then I slowly moved down the roof on my side. I was in my running shorts, so that felt great. I made it down to the lower roof and eventually back down to the ground. Once I calmed down, I did what I should have done to begin with. I called the Trustees.

Fear of Death

Yes, we have our phobias. The fear of drowning; a fear of birds, a fear of heights, a fear of ghosts—they are very real and can debilitate. And then we have our deeper fears. Like fearing the loss of a job, the loss of safety or shelter. We may fear terror attacks, or war, or nuclear war. We may fear a loss of purpose, a meaningless life. Or we may fear rejection or abandonment, or sickness, or the loss of a loved one. We may fear the root of all fears—the fear of death.

And understand what fear does. It paralyzes, and it cuts down the mission of the faithful. But fear can do much worse. Fear will convince a person that everything wrong in their life can be pinned on someone else. This is how distrust is born, this is what grows into ignorance, intolerance, division, hatred, threats, and then in the end,

violence. And this is where we find ourselves in these days. This is why we need to take heart, to counter the fear.

The Good Godly Fear

The disciples are terrified when they see Jesus Walking on the water because they think it's a ghost, he tells them, *"Take heart, it's me. Do not be afraid."* The conditions are wild, but in the middle of it all is Jesus. He is on the way to rescue them. Bold Peter gets out the boat to walk over to Jesus. Jesus says, "Come." But then Peter freezes in fear and begins to sink. Jesus grabs him by the hand and rescues him, and they get into the boat. It's then the wind calms and sea returns to normal. And then a different kind of fear comes over the disciples. They worship Jesus and say, *"Truly you are the Son of God."* It's the good Godly fear that comes over you when you come to the sudden realization that Jesus is who he says he is.

"Take heart," Jesus says, *"it's me!"* The good news is that from here God begins the work of casting out fear through the perfect love as shown and lived out by Jesus. We go from having hearts of fear to having hearts of courage.

Hearts of Courage

We are going to need hearts of lions. We are going to need the grace of God to take heart, to embrace the courage we need to engage this world of ours. At the beginning of Ryan's baptism I asked his parents and godparents questions that apply to all of us:

"Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, and reject the evil powers of this world? and do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"

How is it possible in 2017 that we see flags with swastikas on our streets carried by people chanting anti-Semitic slogans? How is it that in the United States of America there is even something called white supremacy? These fear-filled people and immoral movements are wrong and are to be denounced. Help us, Jesus, we are going to need hearts of courage.

And how is it that in these times when complex global relationships are as fragile as they are immediately accessible, tensions with North Korea have escalated to the point of a possible nuclear war? Shame on any country that continues to devise and test ways to hurt others. And shame on any leader, including and especially any religious leader who justifies nuclear war in the name of God. Our humanity is at stake, and this needs to stop. This is the time for us to take heart and say no more to that which causes fear; and to say no to those who divide us through fear.

I want to read a statement issued last night from our Bishop John Schol:

"I read stories of white supremacists, neo-Nazis and KKK members saying that it is time to take America back. Here in Greater New Jersey this Sunday, the Word of God will be read by United Methodists in nine different languages. The Word made flesh! Greater New Jersey United Methodist Churches have more than 100 cross-racial appointments and nearly 150 multicultural congregations. The Word made

flesh! Our five largest worshipping congregations are Korean. The Word made flesh! Greater New Jersey United Methodists will give witness to mission trips taken to Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala and others will take offerings to support mission work in Ghana, Nigeria, and the Congo. The Word made flesh!

This week I want you to pray for peace and an end to racism and I want you to bear witness in your communities, schools and work places that hate is the work of evil, not Christ, that nuclear arms are the work of a fallen world, not the Creator's desire, and that our words should work toward drawing people to Christ. I call for all of us to spend the week living and modeling the same Word of God that we find in Christ Jesus."

Amen, Bishop Schol, Amen. And to the Bishop's words I add my own. Take heart, followers of Jesus Christ; times of peril are upon us. These are the moments we stand against evil, injustice, and oppression. We will not respond in kind to the hatred and fear that is on the move. We will respond with calm resolve to live out the teachings of Jesus Christ. Ours is to counter division with reconciliation, reject violence and work for justice, denounce war and pray for peace. Ours is to take hearts, which are racked with fear, and fill them with the perfect love of Jesus Christ. Amen.