

## No Fear

As we have been working our way through the gospel of Mark, you have probably noticed that there is one emotion that people experience over and over again when they encounter Jesus. That emotion is not love or hate, not joy or sadness - it is fear.

Let's quickly review some of the accounts that we have already read . . .

- in Mark 4:38 we see the disciples waking Jesus up because their boat is about to be swamped by huge waves. Jesus speaks to the wind and the waves and calms them right down. Then He says to His disciples, "Why are you so afraid?" And the next verse reads, "They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him." They were terrified after the storm had stopped.
- In the next chapter, after Jesus has healed the man who was possessed by a legion of demons and he is sitting calmly and in his right mind, who's afraid? All the villagers who have come out to see this miracle and to investigate the disappearance of 2000 pigs.
- Further into chapter 5 we see Jesus on his way to heal Jairus' daughter who was dying, and part way there He is touched by a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. When Jesus tries to find out who had touched Him, who had drawn healing power out of Him, we're told that she fell at His feet and, "trembling with fear", told Him her story. Notice that in these first three examples, it's Jesus that people are afraid of.
- The fourth example is Jairus. When men come from his household to tell him not to bother Jesus anymore because his daughter has died, Jesus tells him, "Don't be afraid; just believe!"

Now we are caught up to chapter 6 and we read of another incident of the disciples getting caught out on the Sea of Galilee in a storm.

*When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake and He (Jesus) was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night He went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw Him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost. They cried out because they all saw Him and were terrified.*

There it is again - the disciples in a boat frightened to death by Jesus ... but we continue:

*Immediately He spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Then He climbed into the boat with them and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened. (Mark 6:47-52)*

The disciples were fighting with the elements. The wind was against them and they were "straining at the oars". It was somewhere between three and six a.m. and Jesus decided to walk out to see how they were doing. He had to walk on the surface of the lake to get there, but Mark doesn't make a big deal about that - he just says that Jesus

walked on the lake out to where His disciples were. Then comes this curious phrase: "He was about to pass by them".

I think that Jesus was making it look like He was out for a walk, like He didn't notice them, as though He would just walk past without acknowledging them. That's how Peter remembered it, apparently, and I think that in this passage either he, or Mark, wanted to tie this event with an Old Testament passage in which Jesus revealed to His disciples more about who He really is. Maybe the tie in is to Exodus 33 where God says that He will "pass by" Moses and in doing so will reveal Himself to him. Or maybe he has in mind the passage in Job 9:8 where Job describes God with these words: "He walks upon the waves of the sea", and in v. 11, "If He passes by Me, I will not recognize Him." Either way, it's probably not crucial that we know for sure what Jesus' intention was on that night ... or why.

Notice that there is no sense that they are alarmed by the force of the wind that is making it so hard for them to reach shore. This is where they feel most at home. This is their workplace; they are very familiar with the sudden storms that rise up on the Galilee. But when you've been working hard, exerting all your strength trying to gain the harbor and then, suddenly, you see through the darkness and the sprays of water a ghost-like figure walking ... on the water ... towards you ... then real panic sets in. The disciples were terrified and cried out, as if to warn one another about what was coming towards them.

As soon as Jesus sees their fear, He speaks to them - He must have been pretty close by now for them to hear His voice, "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid!" Again and again and again in these gospels, Jesus speaks to people who are captive to their fears and says, "Don't be afraid any more." And the message that goes with it in this and several other passages is, "Don't be afraid - I'm here. It's Me." And then Mark writes that the disciples still didn't understand who Jesus was, didn't understand about the feeding of the 5000, their hard hearts couldn't grasp that the Creator could walk on the surface of the water He had created.

The message we should grab hold of from these accounts in Mark and elsewhere is that wherever Jesus is, we don't need to be afraid any more. And where is He? Where did Jesus say He would be before He left His disciples to return to His Father? He said He would be with them always, at all times, to the very end of the age. He told His disciples that He would not leave them as orphans, but that He would come to them (John 14:18), in the same breath that He promised the Holy Spirit. So Jesus, by His Spirit, is present with believers at all times ... and where He is present, there is a reason for us to have courage and no need for fear.

Now, let's look at a second story:

*They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again, He took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to Him. "We are*

*going up to Jerusalem,” He said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles, who will mock Him and spit on Him, flog Him and kill Him. Three days later He will rise again.* (Mark 10:32-34)

As they walk towards Jerusalem, Jesus is out in front of His followers, walking purposefully towards the destiny He has talked with them about before. It is clear from the passage that they are in awe of Him - “the disciples were astonished” can’t refer to the journey towards the city, but the way in which it was happening. Jesus was intent on fulfilling His mission, leading them on towards their fate, and it is something about His manner that makes the disciples wonder in amazement ... again. The people following along behind the disciples are described here as being afraid - not that they hadn’t been to Jerusalem before; there were three pilgrimage feasts every year that Jews from all over the known world would come to - but there was something about Jesus that frightened His followers.

So He takes the Twelve aside and tells them, “Don’t worry; everything’s going to be alright.” No, He doesn’t tell them not to be afraid! He tells them in detail what awaits Him in Jerusalem. He will be betrayed, condemned, mocked, spit on, flogged and killed. But, the most important thing, the light at the end of the tunnel, the fulfillment of Jesus’ purpose in going to Jerusalem is that, three days later, He will rise again.

So, yes, there is reason to be afraid. There is reason to dread what Jesus is anticipating over their time in Jerusalem. It will be painful. It will be wrenching and sad. But God has a good purpose in it, and God’s good purpose will be accomplished when Jesus rises again on the third day.

Notice that there is no “fear not!” coming from Jesus’ lips in this passage. There are no calm assuring words promising His continued presence. No, this is the time when He will be taken away from them, when they will, for those three days, have no assurance of His presence, only an overpowering sense of tragic loss. And His approach to this impending crisis is simply to point past it, to say that, in the end, everything is going to be alright - better than alright. Jesus will rise again from the dead.

Now, there is one more group in the gospel of Mark that exhibits fear, but it’s not a fear of Jesus. That group is known as the Pharisees and teachers of the law and they are afraid of the people.

*While Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to Him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”*

*Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer Me and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism - was it from heaven, or from men? Tell Me.”*

*They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say ‘From heaven’, he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’ . . . .” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) So they*

*answered Jesus, "We don't know."*

(Mark 11:27-33)

Another passage, from the next chapter, right after Jesus has told them the parable of the wicked farmers:

*Then they looked for a way to arrest Him because they knew He had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left Him and went away. (Mark 12:12)*

So, we have the disciples and crowds afraid of Jesus and we have the Jewish religious leaders afraid of the crowds. Both groups are afraid of something that has greater power than they do. The disciples and the crowds see in Jesus a power and authority that terrifies them, while the religious leaders see in the crowds the kind of power that could bring on their heads the military might of Rome and destroy their privileged position among the Jewish people.

What does Jesus say to both groups? To those whose hearts are open to Him, who have shown that they respect Him, whose fear could be compared to awe or amazement or outright wonder, Jesus says, in most situations, "You don't need to be afraid. I'm with you, I'm for you, I've come to bring you good things." Those who have an appropriate fear don't actually need to be afraid. To those who fear people, who always have a finger up to test the winds of public opinion, who have greater concern for their own reputation than for honoring their Creator, Jesus never says, "Don't be afraid." I find that so interesting. If a person fears God, has an appropriate respect for who He is, honors Him - that person has nothing to fear. But if someone disrespects God and only fears what people can do to him or her, they have reason to be afraid.

I want to jump outside of Mark's gospel for a minute here to look at something that Jesus said that was recorded by Luke. In chapter 12, Jesus has just been talking to Pharisees and to the experts in religious law. He had been warning them against being seduced by a desire to have people honor you, as well as the desire to honor people who, in the past, did bad things to those God had sent to warn them. Now, in chapter 12, Jesus turns to His disciples and says:

*Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy . . . I tell you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him."*  
(Luke 12:1,4,5)

Is Jesus telling people to be afraid of Satan, as some have suggested? No, because Satan doesn't have the authority to judge the earth, to send someone to hell - only the ability to deceive some into thinking that this is a better option for them than what God has prepared. So, in the context of warning His disciples against the hypocrisy of their religious leaders, Jesus is saying that they are not the ones to be feared, even though they can kill you - God is the One being to whom we have to answer for our ultimate destiny.

The Jewish religious leaders were only concerned about their present situation, the authority they could wield on this earth, the respect and honor that people would give them in the here and now. Jesus tells His disciples that these leaders are being short-sighted, that they, and we, should look beyond the very temporary conditions in which we live or die, and make decisions that God will honor, and that will bring eternal blessings.

This whole theme of what inspires fear, the kind of fear that motivates action, is an interesting one in the Gospels. I want to summarize the different fears that Jesus responds to, or chooses not to respond to, and make some applications.

1. The many times Jesus called on people to resist their fears, to not continue to be afraid, were situations in which He was calling them to believe in Him, to trust Him. Faith was being presented as the antidote to fear. Faith is trusting that Jesus is Lord over all, that He is stronger than the forces of nature and more to be believed than the wisdom of human beings. Faith is putting our confidence in a person we can't see because we trust Him more than all the people we can see. Over and over again throughout the gospels, we see Jesus calling for faith and part of that call was, "Don't be afraid." It is important for people who put their trust in Jesus to know that they can live in a new way, a way free from anxiety about the circumstances we confront on a daily basis. Does that mean we will never feel anxious about things that, for example, threaten the people we love or challenge our sense of security? No, but it means that we can move past those initial feelings of panic or fear, we can pray with confidence, and we can learn to lean into Jesus for hope in hard times. When Jesus called out the woman who had been healed by touching His cloak, He wasn't trying to make her afraid; He wasn't trying to embarrass her. He just wanted her to know that her faith had healed her, that she didn't need to feel anxious about her condition anymore, but could go on her way in peace. That's what He wants to see in us, as well; a growing confidence that, despite our circumstances, we learn to reach out to Him, to look to Him for our help, to find our hope and our courage in His presence.
2. The second very obvious application is that Jesus didn't want His disciples, nor does He want us, to live in fear of what other people might think of us. "What if I bow my head and pray out loud in a restaurant? What will people think of me? Will they be mocking me in their hearts?" The answer to that kind of question is that you will most likely never have any idea what people are thinking about you at that moment ... and, that it doesn't matter. The point is that, even though we have those moments where we wonder what people think of us for expressing some aspect of our faith, we should never take those thoughts seriously. If a Sikh man can demonstrate his faith by wearing a turban and a Muslim woman can demonstrate her faith by wearing a face covering or a head scarf, why should a Christian be afraid to pray in public or stand up for truth or plead for mercy for someone who doesn't deserve it? The leaders of the Jewish religion in Jesus' day were constantly thinking about what "the people", the masses, might do in this situation or that situation. They were obsessed with the desire to be in control of public behavior because they feared Roman intervention so much. And they were very afraid of losing their positions of influence and prestige among the ordinary population of Judea. None of this obsession with what others

think about us should be a controlling influence in our lives. Yes, we may feel a little awkward sometimes, but don't be controlled by that feeling. Jesus calls us to care more about what our Father in heaven thinks about what we're doing than what somebody on the street, or some neighbor, or someone we work with, or go to school with, might be thinking. After all, God is the One who will judge the world and He is the One who gives eternal rewards and punishments - shouldn't we give great weight to that in our thinking?

- 3.** Which brings me to the third application, which is that there are some things that are legitimate sources of fear. Jesus didn't counsel His disciples that they had nothing to fear from His coming execution. Jesus didn't counsel His followers that there is no need to fear the Judge of all the earth. Jesus did not say that all fear is a sign of a lack of faith. What He did say, and what does help us in trying times, is that He is with us, His Spirit lives within us, and that nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us from the love of God. There are some scary things going on in the world today - many of them are happening to believers. Jesus doesn't say that trusting Him will mean we are protected from all the evil that's in the world, but He does say that He has overcome the world and that trusting Him in and through these challenges is the best way through them. So, next time you are feeling overwhelmed with anxiety about some situation you are facing, be sure to do these three things:
  - a.** Pray about your situation - even ask others to pray with you and for you
  - b.** Don't lose the perspective that God still loves you and that He cares about your need right now
  - c.** Walk through your circumstances with eyes open to the power and presence of Jesus with you and ears open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. And keep asking for the faith and the courage to walk it out in a way that pleases and honors God.