

## Fear and Fulfillment

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

What do you fear?

1. Arachnophobia – The fear of spiders
2. Acrophobia – The fear of heights.
3. Agoraphobia – The fear of open or crowded spaces.
4. Claustrophobia – The fear of small spaces
5. Aerophobia – The fear of flying.
6. Trypophobia – The fear of holes
7. Atychiphobia – The fear of failure.
8. Alektorophobia – The fear of chickens.
9. Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia – The fear of long words.
10. Xenophobia – The fear of the unknown
11. Achievemephobia – The fear of success.
12. Theophobia – The fear of God

Those are just a few of the “top 100” phobias of today, but I would like to point out two in particular as they help us focus in on our readings for this morning: Atychiphobia and Theophobia. The fear of failure and the fear of God.

To begin to understand Paul’s writings to the Romans this morning, we need a bit of context. Paul was struggling with the children of Israel and their tendency to seek to establish their own righteousness rather than God’s. This righteousness, or “right relationship” was very much about “doing”. Do the right things, have the right relationship. Fulfill the law and its 613 commandments and God will be pleased. It was that simple.

Unfortunately, the corollary of this is FAIL to do the right things, fail to have the right relationship, fail to fulfill the law and all its commandments and God will be angry. And since it is virtually impossible to fulfill every iota of the law, the assumption becomes that God is or will be angry and therefore it becomes necessary to offer sacrifices to offset your failings. Your relationship with God is strictly about YOUR actions and the failure of that relationship is the result of your inability to perform to the requirement of the law.

Into that context Paul reminds his readers of the words of Christ...love God with all you have and love your neighbor as yourself. This is true for the Jews and this is true for Gentiles.

This is important: Paul revokes the sense that somehow good works can save us, that any human has the capacity to save him or herself. Before, Paul assured his readers that there was nothing they could do to separate themselves from the love of God. Now, he tells them this next shocking truth; NOTHING they can do will that earn them righteousness, that only God, only grace, can set us free, can release us from condemnation. Grace alone repairs the brokenness we feel.

Brokenness that is the gap between the people we strive to be and the fallible people we are.

Brokenness that is the gap between God's perfection and our imperfection.

Brokenness that is in the divisions we create and perpetuate between all of us in God's creation.

Paul affirms to his readers that Jesus restores what was broken, fulfilling God's promise of salvation, fulfilling the law. Jesus is the end of the law.

What a shocking, surprising, statement! All of the law, all of the prophets, the Torah, the Pentateuch, everything for thousands of years has come, like an arrow from God to pierce our hardened hearts in the person of this man, Jesus.

I guess we shouldn't be surprised; long ago the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

But, you know, sometimes it's HARD to listen. You know...the head gets it but the heart is still struggling.

I suspect it was that way on that dark and stormy night sitting in a little fishing boat in the midst of the storm. Now this wasn't just any storm! Many of the men on that boat were fishermen who had spent their lives on the water; no little blow-up storm would frighten them!

As we approach this story, we do so with great caution. It's far too easy to read this as just one more of the miracle stories, say "that's nice" and move on. But to do so would mean to risk just hearing at the cost of understanding the message.

Remember what has happened so far: the crowds have been fed and sent home.

Jesus' disciples are sailing back across the lake and Jesus FINALLY has some solitude in which to grieve his cousin John's death. But His time is cut short when the disciples are overwhelmed by a freak storm. Like always, Jesus lays aside His own grief to rescue His friends. In this action, the disciples begin to see, however faintly, who Jesus is and what He is. Here is the arrow tip, ready to pierce human hearts in the fulfillment of the law.

So how do we read what comes next? Is the storm just a freak storm? They happen. I've experience HUGE storms that seem to come from nowhere when sailing on lake Michigan and they can be frightening.

Or was this storm a reflection of the storm of grief that Jesus and His followers are facing. Or, perhaps, it is a symbolic prophecy of the greater storm of crucifixion yet to come.

While those are interesting speculations and worthy of inspection, for our purposes this morning, it doesn't really matter. The critical point is the Jesus demonstrates what He will later promise – His presence is always with them, and He will always be there sustain them.

Do you remember when I quoted Isaiah a few minutes ago? Chapter 43 starts with these words: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine". Affirming and comforting...something we need to hear and understand on a regular basis! But the next verse continues, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you ... they shall not overwhelm you."

"I will be with you". Not "if you do the right thing I'll be with your" or "if you offer the right sacrifices, I'll be with you". No, the statement has no qualifiers; there is NOTHING you can do to earn God's presence. "I'll be with you".

So now let's put all of that together and look at the remainder of today's story with fresh eyes. Not looking for another miracle story, not looking for a shallow (pardon the pun) display of Jesus's power and authority, but as something more.

Let's pick up the Gospel story just as the storm hits. The disciples are terrified and, in the midst of the storm something even MORE terrifying happens; there is a figure walking across the wind-whipped waters like a ghost.

Recognizing Jesus, the terror intensifies, not diminishes. Jesus calls out, loudly, over the storm, "Fear not, it is I". Now we would miss a crucial part of the story if we failed to hear the words actually spoken, "Ego, eime" ...I AM. I can't help but think the divine implications of that phrase would be more terrifying still!

I will admit that, in this next part, I have no idea what went through Peter's mind. Was it something like, "oh, yeah? Prove it!" or perhaps, "Way cool, let me try"? Or maybe it was more like, let's see You prove it! "If it IS you, command me to come to you on the water. And if it isn't You, if you are the devil or a ghost or something, uh ... I'll just drown?"

"Come on out", says Jesus.

Like always, impulses speeding far ahead of his rational mind, Peter goes out and walks on water. Wow! It's real! It's happening!

...and then his brain catches up. Distracted, he loses, what? Concentration? Faith? Trust? Crazy-making adrenaline?

There's wind and waves and darkness and lightening and this is impossible, and down he goes.

Peter shouts for help.

The next part is often described as a rebuke...something like "you of little faith". A disenchantment, a scolding, a disappointment. But I prefer a different way of hearing what happens next.

Remember what Paul was saying? That Jesus was the end of the law, the fulfillment of God's presence in our lives? What if we take that seriously, that God's promise of fulfillment is true? What if, instead of finding fear, we look past to fulfillment?

Back to Peter. Use your new ears to hear how this story unfold in a different way; rather than rebuke, Jesus is ready for a fist bump! "Why did you doubt, you of little faith? You HAD it!"

Boy, I GET that! Like a parent teaching a child to ride a two-wheel bicycle, eventually you let go and the child sails off in perfect balance. But in a moment of self-consciousness, everything falls apart and the child falters and falls.

The parent calls out, “You did it! You were doing it! You can do it!!” I remember those milestones of praise and encouragement, wonder, pride, celebration – and even the bandages and ice packs over well-earned wounds.

Not long, not long at all and the child forgets learning to ride the bike and takes off with friends at dizzying speeds to explore a much-expanded world.

If there’s anything I don’t understand about this story I wonder why Jesus didn’t insist on Peter trying it one more time.

Jesus meets Peter’s panic with outstretched arms and the gentle encouragement of a loving parent. *Look! You transcended the deep. You see, your faith CAN move mountains and support you in the worst of times. Why did you doubt?*

Indeed. Why do you doubt? Why do WE doubt?

I suspect we are closet law-seekers. We, like the Jews Paul was addressing, want a set list of do’s and don’ts to follow. We are not quite ready to accept the idea that the culmination of the law is before us.

The **fact** that NOTHING can separate us from God’s love...that **fact** that God stands waiting, with open arms, for us to welcome us in. The **fact** that all this has come to fruition in the person of Jesus Christ. Oh, we hear it, but I don’t think we get it.

Perhaps we are more like Peter than we think. Maybe it was Peter’s failure that opened the way for a deepening of faith more secure than success might have offered. Or, perhaps it was the loving Presence of the One who lifted him from his terror.

In any case, Peter may not remember how he walked on water, but he will remember how he was saved. That’s our story as well: Live out your faith! Dare to place your trust and follow! Nothing can separate you from God’s love. God has shown you the fulfillment of the law in Christ Jesus. You have spent far too much time being afraid...but fulfillment is here, present in your lives.

OK, you’re going to stumble, fall, and get up and try again. “Why doubt, you of little faith? YOU HAD IT!”

Living out a Christian life? You DID it! You were doing it! You can do it!