

The Unexpected Jesus; This Is Good News?

Rev. Gene Nelson
The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Mark 8:31-38

It has been said that Ernest Hemingway had a single theme for most of his novels: fear is our chief enemy; courage is our primary virtue. If that is true, then perhaps his most characteristic novel was *The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. It describes a man who has never really grown up. Macomber is well-born, well-educated and financially quite well off. But he is a prisoner of his fears – alive but never really living. And he is married to a beautiful woman who is openly contemptuous of him.

The two of them decide to go on an African safari. And there, out in the bush, all the agony of this inner fear he has borne for so long bursts into the open. He wounds a lion, but instead of pursuing it, turns and runs away. That night, in utter contempt, his wife betrays him for another man. But on the next day, while hunting water buffalo, and with his world crumbling around him, something remarkable happens to Francis Macomber. He suddenly catches the spirit of the hunt, loses his fear, discovers the exhilaration of danger and abruptly grows up.

This new life lasts less than an hour, because during the hunt he is accidentally shot and killed. But in that brief span he discovers that this is the only real life he has ever had. Hence Hemingway's title, *The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. Again, for Hemingway, there can be no life if one is imprisoned by fear.

Which, naturally, leads me to a "Peanuts" cartoon. Linus has come to see Doctor Lucy – Psychiatric Help – 5 cents – and the Doctor is most definitely in. Linus begins: "I'm in sad shape. My life is full of fear and anxiety. The only thing that keeps me going is this blanket. I need help!"

Lucy responds: "Well, as they say on T.V., the mere fact that you realize you need help indicates that you are not too far gone. I think we had better try to pinpoint your fears. If we can find out what it is you are afraid of, we can label it. Are you afraid of responsibility? Then you have hypengyophobia!"

Linus: "I don't think that's quite it."

Lucy: "How about cats? If you are afraid of cats you have Ailurophobia."

Linus: "Well, sort of... but I'm not sure."

Lucy: Are you afraid of staircases? If you are then you have climacaphobia. Or maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you might have pantophobia? "

Linus asks, "What's pantophobia?"

"It's the fear of everything."

To which Linus cries out, "That's it!!"

Now, while we may not quite be in the same situation as Linus or Francis McComber, the human experience of fear is a universal theme. Like it or not, daily life brings with it a certain amount of risk, pain, anxiety and change. And with all that, inevitably there comes a level of fear. Now one could argue that some fear is healthy, even necessary. I think of Starbuck saying, in "Moby Dick", that he wanted no man in his boat who was not afraid of a whale. So perhaps the issue is not eliminating or tranquilizing all fear, but rather how we handle fear when it inevitably grips our lives.

Turning to our text, Jesus announces to the disciples that it is time to take an evening boat ride to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But soon after they depart, a great windstorm arises, so great that waves crash against the boat. Indeed the waves are so high that water begins to fill up the boat. The disciples and their boat are in grave danger. But Jesus is oblivious to all this because, incredibly, he is sound asleep in the stern of the boat. I wish I could sleep that well at night! But the disciples are not impressed. Distressed and frightened, they wake Jesus up. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" These are not happy campers. The Hebrews were not sea-faring people. Oh yes, they put fishing boats out on the Sea of Galilee, which really was a large lake, but that was more than enough water for them. They saw big water, the deep oceans, as places of surging, dark, out of control chaos, something to be dreaded and avoided. It is no accident that a key moment in the Genesis creation story is when God separates land and water. God is the One able to bring order out of the watery chaos. But, it would seem, not only God.

Jesus, without a word to the disciples, gets up, rebukes the wind and says to the sea – "shut up!" (a somewhat more literal translation than, "Be Still"!) And the wind and sea obey him. The chaos has no power over him. Indeed the opposite is true. I believe Mark first points us back to the creation story – now there is another who can calm the chaos of the sea. And he wants us to see the stark contrast between the calm of Jesus and the fear of the disciples when chaos, destruction and impending doom swirl all around them. But, even after calming the sea, Jesus isn't quite finished. He turns to them and asks, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

The man never stops asking maddening questions. “Why are you afraid? Oh, I don’t know. I guess because there was a storm and our boat was sinking and there wasn’t a life preserver in sight. It seemed like fear and panic were reasonable reactions at the time!” Why are you afraid? What do you do when you must face life’s storms of uncontrollable chaos, disorder and anxiety – when you feel helpless and stripped of all the familiar sources of safety and security? Interesting that Jesus never says there is nothing to be afraid of. That storm was quite fearsome as are the “wind and waves” that threaten us. The hard truth is that many fearsome things are very real: isolation, pain, illness, meaninglessness, rejection, losing one’s job, money problems, failure, illness and death. I would even add the many uncertainties of retirement after a long career in one place. I discover – often 3:00 in the morning – how many different faces of fear can creep into my days... and nights. But again, not all fear is bad. It can prepare us emotionally to deal with a difficult situation, can even make us want to do something about that which we fear. A hundred years ago, that grand old preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, said “God planted fear in the soul as truly as he planted hope or courage. It is a kind of bell or gong which rings the mind into quick life in order to face unusual danger.”

But this then leads to a second observation. Fear can be extraordinarily destructive if, rather than being a temporary stimulus to actions of some creative sort, it becomes a permanent and ruling passion. And there are so many Lords of Fear out there these days, many it would seem running for President, telling us to be afraid, be very afraid – afraid of change, afraid of terrorists, afraid of anyone who does not look or believe like us, afraid of moving beyond the limits of our own comfort or safety. The trouble with such fear, again fear as a ruling passion, is that it makes us smaller... less than. Such fear robs us of true life, leading us into a stingy, cautious, narrow-minded way of living that really is not living at all. It was C.S. Lewis who wrote, “Hatred is often the compensation by which a frightened man reimburses himself for the miseries of Fear. The more he fears, the more he will hate.” His words sound a bit harsh, until you consider how nasty and mean-spirited and fear-obsessed our national mood and discussion have become. When fear begins to shape human lives, when life becomes an exercise in securing ourselves against our insecurities, human community becomes distorted, even broken, as the humanity of the other is too often denied. As columnist, Eugene Robinson, wrote recently, we begin seeking scapegoats instead of solutions.

Which brings us back to Jesus’ question: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Are we going to be shaped and determined by our fears, or by faith and practices that immerse us in the power of Jesus’ love and in the peace and hope only he can give? A contemporary fable: There was a seeker who met Jesus on a lonely road. “Lord,” inquired the pilgrim, “after all the people had been fed with the bread and fish, you said to the disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments so that nothing may be lost.’ What are the fragments that must be gathered up?” Jesus gazed at the wayfarer a long moment, then answered, “The fragments are your fears, which multiply like the loaves and fishes and fill more baskets than you can carry by yourself. These must not be lost. Instead they must be brought to me, so that I may bear them with you.”

“Why are you afraid?” Behind the question is an invitation to place our hands in Christ’s hands, with a hope that can lift us up from our fears. It is an invitation to respond to the real people in the real places where we live instead of to the stories we have heard about what has happened to other people somewhere else; an invitation to look into each other’s eyes expecting to see allies instead of threats.” And yes, I suppose it can be a dangerous way to live, but it is also the way to living a life that truly matters – a life for Christ’s sake; a life that pours itself out for others as a matter of course, a life that spends itself without counting the cost, knowing that there is always more life where our own life comes from. Says Barbara Brown Taylor, “You can try to save your life, being very, very careful about what you say yes to, being very cautious about whom you let into your life, frisking everyone at the door and letting only the most harmless people inside. You can live that way, but do not expect to enjoy it very much or to accomplish very much and do not expect to be missed when your safe, free-from-fear life finally comes to an end.” We must not allow ourselves to become so consumed with fear that we forget who we are and whose we are and why we are alive in the first place. That’s what Jesus is talking about!

Yes, fear is confronted in our text, but not by a sudden burst of courage or resolve on the part of the disciples. They never really pull themselves together. Rather is it Jesus who calms them and the storm by the power of his presence. Again, chaos and fear have no power over him. And understand he isn’t suggesting that we should sign up for skydiving or do dangerous things just to prove how courageous and free from fear we are. But he is inviting us to turn to the Lord of the wind and the waves, the one we can trust to be more powerful than any of the storms that rage in our own lives.

The truth of this text is that even though there are real and fearsome things in this life, they need not paralyze us; they need not have dominion over us; they need not own us, because no matter how fierce and frightening the storm, we are not alone in the boat.