Fear or Faith

First in a January 2020 series “Do Not Fear”

# Scripture: Matt. 14:22-36; Isa. 41:8-14

# Key Thought: When we are fearful, we can learn to have faith.

# Intro:

We must admit, it has been a fearful couple weeks on the international scene as the specter of war in the Middle East has advanced closer that it has been in some years.

We all have enough fear to combat as we deal with the increasing violence in our own country, including violence against people at worship and violence against the police, without such worries about international peace. The increasingly divisive US political scene doesn’t help our state of mind either.

# Circumstances create fear.

If you add to that any personal situations in our lives that are causing us to be fearful – financial pressures, health issues, job uncertainties, or relationships stresses. The result can be crippling fear.

We all face a future that is unknown. We like to think the future is predictable, but underneath we know it isn't, hence our fears. Often we become fearful of future events that aren’t even likely to happen. Remember I told you about the administrative assistant I had who once joked, “Worry must work, at least 90% of what I worry about doesn’t happen.” But we all know that fear of what might happen can cause us to freeze into inaction in the present. So, fear is destructive in our lives- destructive to our happiness, our productivity and especially destructive to our peace of mind and heart.

In Isaiah 41, the prophet is speaking in a situation where Israel was facing an enemy. They had reason to be fearful. We are not told the exact circumstances, but someone was “waging war against them” (Isa. 41:12). But we are so thankful for the insight the prophet gives us to help us in our fearful times. More on that in a moment.

Peter had unusual faith to attempt what he did - he got out of the boat to walk on water at Jesus' invitation. Most of us never leave the safety of the predictable. Peter got started on a faith adventure with God but then his attention went to the wind and the waves – the immediate threats to his existence, the dangers that were ever present. And he started to sink.

Fear has a way of distracting us and even causing us to sink too. Our mind too gets locked in on the problems we face. Then we shrink back from what we are attempting. Our mental state deteriorates. We refuse to risk. We may even be paralyzed completely into inaction-all because of fear.

# God invites us to have faith.

## God doesn’t want us to be fearful

God wants us to operate in faith! Peter wrote in his first letter,

Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. 1 Peter 3:14-15 NRSV

We just went through the Christmas season. One of the key messages of the divine messengers in the Christmas passages in simply, “Do not be afraid” (Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:13, 30; Luke 2:10). Those words headline God’s message to Joseph, to Zechariah, to Mary and to the Shepherds on Christmas Eve. Certainly, they must be for us too.

## Isaiah’s message

In the Old Testament, Isaiah the prophet invites the people of Israel to believe that God would come to their aid despite the circumstances. Three times in the passage we read the prophet encourages Israel not to be afraid.

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

 Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob, little Israel, do not fear,
for I myself will help you,” declares the Lord,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.
 Isa 41:10, 14 NIV

We do not know the exact circumstances of the writing of that chapter but judging from the general historical knowledge of the times that we have, and the rest of the context, it is likely that the circumstances did not look good. Yet they were to have faith in the midst of difficult circumstances and put their hope in God to bring them through.

Stopping to think about it, if the circumstances looked good, it likely would not really be faith anyway. We would just be projecting a good outcome based on the good circumstances. Faith comes into play when we trust God when we can't see the good result. When we believe God will help us through even though we can’t see exactly how, that is faith.

Sometimes we need to have faith for an immediate, short term situation such as a financial shortfall, a broken bone, or an equipment failure. Sometimes we need to have faith that God will help us find a way in a longer term situation- finding a new career, recovering from divorce, or, heaven forbid, doing life alone after the loss of a spouse. All are fearful situations but in different ways. In every one, we need faith in God to help us though.

As the writer of Hebrews put it;

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. Heb 11:1 NIV

## Peter’s situation

Let’s look at Peter’s situation.

The question arises, "Why did Jesus encourage Peter to come to him on the water?" Well, I suppose because Peter asked. But there is certainly more to it than that. We discern that by what Jesus said when Peter began to sink. Jesus gently chided him, "You of little faith…why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31). This was a lesson in faith for Peter and for the watching disciples. Jesus invited Peter to act on his invitation and believe it was possible to walk on the water. He was to believe on the basis that Peter could see Jesus walking on the water and because the invitation of Jesus implied that Peter could too. To Peter’s eternal credit, he took Jesus at his word and stepped out of the boat. At first, Peter was successful. But then fear took away his success and Jesus needed to rescue him.

A minister friend was talking about a book he was reading that discussed the Jewish Feast of Booths, also called Feast of Tabernacles. As you are probably aware, once each year, the Israelites were instructed to sleep outside or on the roof for a few days in a hut constructed of branches. My friend was telling me that the rules dictated that one must be able to see the stars through the branches, because the focus of this instruction was to emphasize our human vulnerability and our dependence upon God. One key purpose of the feast was to remind us of the need for faith.

## What Jesus noticed

One thing we all appreciate about Jesus is that he didn’t judge people by the external standards that other humans use. It didn’t matter what race or ethnicity people were. It didn’t matter how rich or poor they were. It didn’t matter to Jesus where they had been in life. Jesus viewed people with lenses that looked past the common human distinctions. But one thing he was looking for and one thing he did judge in people he met was their faith. In the very next chapter, Matt. 15, we find that almost weird story of the Canaanite woman who brought her demon-possessed daughter to Jesus for healing when Jesus was outside Israel in the region of Tyre and Sidon. At first Jesus seems to answer her harshly and we don’t know why. But it can only be to make plain what Jesus discerned and what he noted in the passage,

Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.Matt 15:28 NIV

Remember that Jesus had said the same about the centurion who told Jesus that he didn’t need to come to his house, only say the word and his servant would be healed (Matt. 8:8-10).

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.**”**Matt 8:10 NIV

Jesus wants us to have faith.

# Faith drives out fear.

The point we need to remember is that when fear is driving our actions, we are not living in faith. And conversely, when we have faith, we will not need to live in fear. There may still be causes for fear; but faith will overcome them! The Apostle John put it bluntly,

This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.
1 John 5:4 NIV

Paul explained the concept without using the word fear.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Phil 4:6-7 NIV

When our minds are looking to the power of Jesus to help us, then the situation we are facing seems so much less formidable. It may not have changed at all, but our mindset has changed a great deal. We are trusting God to help us. As the Psalmist wrote:

In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can flesh do to me? Ps 56:4 ESV

And Isaiah assured us;

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. Isa 12:2 NIV

# Conclusion

Conclude with a story:

God With Us by JoAnne DeSerio Jones, p. 135, “Stranded on a Dark Night”