**Center of Gravity** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Mark 4:35-41 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Not quite 20 years ago, I was on the road with my parents on the way to Florida to meet my brother and his family to go to Disney World. As we were driving through Illinois, my mother was listening to a weather radio and there were storm watches around but, as in Minnesota, weather was reported by county and in those terms, we didn't really know where we were. Visually, it looked like we were driving toward the sunshine.

Until the road curved South and it was as if someone turned the lights out. There were State Patrol cars off to the left shoulder with their lights flashing; cars and trucks were pulling over to the right shoulder so we did the same. As the wind shook our car, I thought of these disciples in their little boat. I got a feel, just a feel, for the kind of wind that could flip a car. We watched the sky for funnels and wondered when or how we'd ever get into the ditch if necessary.

After about 20-30 minutes, the wind died down. Then we realized that some of the darkness had been caused by gusting topsoil as one farmer's field got blown to the other side of the freeway. As the wind eased, the traffic began to move again. But, just as we headed down the road, it began to pour buckets of rain. My gas pedal foot was shaking as I tried to keep us moving; my heartbeat matched the frantic sweep of the windshield wipers on high and I wanted with all my being that my loved ones and I were somewhere more sturdy and safe.

We had gone about 10 miles in 45 minutes when the sky finally lightened and the rains let up. We made it another 20 miles before the skies began to darken again and we stopped for the night.

Most of the time, we are more clearly standing on the LIFE side of the portal but storms, accidents, and illness can suddenly throw us toward that threshold where life and death meet. It is hard to be in the place of the unknown and the uncontrollable. This is where Fear owns the concession stand.

I sometimes think we can get ahead of the disciples because of centuries of progress and technology that tries to keep us more safe–but the portal is always there and storms still come. At times, no matter how long and well we’ve  practiced prayer, contemplation, or the reading of scripture, life intervenes and peace can be hard to find. In today’s passage we can see Jesus’ frustration and even anger with this human frailty.

“Why do you fear,” he asks, as he challenges the disciples’ faith. In Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage from *The Message*, Jesus says, “Why are you such cowards? Don't you have any faith at all?” I know I’ve been there.

A few more years before that trip to Florida, while in seminary and working as a chaplain intern at Rush Hospital in Chicago, I received a request for a visit from an AIDS patient. I was told that he'd wanted to talk about end-of -life issues and a health care directive. When I got to the room, he was pacing around his bed. He tried to sit down for a conversation but was unable to stay still. He told me he'd been hospitalized the previous week and had been stable enough to go home on Friday. On Saturday, he'd attended the funeral of a friend who died from AIDS and then came into the hospital again through the emergency room on Sunday. Because he went from the hospital to a funeral, he saw himself nearing that portal between life and death and he was full of fear.

He was much the same the next day, when again, I received a request to talk about a health care directive. The second time I saw him, he was in bed using an oxygen mask. Even though he was prone, his anxiety was still peaked; his hands were shaking and his legs in constant motion. He moved the mask to speak for to me but put it back on to listen. He lamented that he could not feel the presence of God. He knew that his faith should have been helping him cope, but he could not feel faith or hope.

So, he was one of the disciples in the boat. And I shared this story, I told him that even though Jesus was asleep, he was in the boat. The disciples had to jostle him when they needed his help. They had to pull the pillow out from under his head to get him to wake up; regardless of his anger, he put out his hands and said, “Peace. Be still.” Jesus never fails to care.

The patient asked me to sing Amazing Grace, which I did, and then he tried to get some much needed sleep. The next morning I had an urgent request to see him; I expected the worst. But, when I walked into the room, he was sitting in his bed with a number of picture books open around him and he was sketching. Not only had his entire demeanor changed from anxiety to calm, his face changed. I might not have recognized him if I had passed him in the hallway. He told me he'd been unable to sleep the previous night and a storm had come up. He'd gone to the window watched the heavy rains running down the Eisenhower freeway. The storm and the water reminded him of Jesus’ words, “Peace. Be still.” He had been lost, but now was found. He had been afraid, but then felt safe, felt saved.

The first question in the Heidelberg catechism is this: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” And the answer is this: “That I belong–body and soul, in life and in death–not to myself but to my faithful savior Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head, indeed that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.” No matter what comes, this is our center of gravity.

The patient was a Catholic; this would not have been his catechism, it’s mine, but this is about the moments when doctrine becomes lived experience. Jesus came to him in the night and taught him this lesson for real. He awoke in Jesus because of the storm. Still physically sick, he had the ultimate wellness of knowing himself to be one of Jesus’ beloveds; in the midst of illness unto death Jesus gave him back his life. and my friends, as human beings we all have that illness unto death. and every day we have to choose to live from fear or from our Christ the center of gravity.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote, “When the fear of death leaves us, the destructive craving for life leaves us too. We can then restrict our desires and our demands to our natural requirements. The dreams of power and happiness and luxury and far-off places, which are used to create artificial wants, no longer entice us. They have become ludicrous. So we shall use only what we really need, and shall no longer be prepared to go along with the lunacy of extravagance and waste. We do not even need solemn appeals for saving and moderation; for life itself is glorious, and here joy in existence can be had for nothing” (Jürgen Moltmann, [*The Power of the Powerless*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/374506)).

Discipleship and fear are not productive companions. Jesus shared well-meaning and necessary correction. How many of the storms that surround us are of our own making? As Moltmann suggests, fear is driving us to squander the planet’s resources for self-soothing luxuries and dreams of happiness; dread and worry are driving us to put our heads down and allow injustice and inequality to continue.

The fear and anxiety that comes with change often leads us to hang on to patterns of living that are not really life giving. Fear can prompt a need for armor–which means approaching life with a protective outer shell that is contrary to an open heart and the practice of compassion. We lose creativity, curiosity, and open-mindedness when we are frightened. Fear can lead to defensiveness, numbing, possibly addition. Fear is also anatural, human response that can alert us to real danger but a culture that cultivates fear keeps us on high alert all the time. Fear is now most often talked about as FIGHT, FLIGHT, or FREEZE any of which are contributing to the plague of chronic stress affecting the health of our culture as well as our own physical well-being. Jesus does not want us to live this way. Rather, he wants us to imitate his open and loving nature.

Joan Mitchell sees fear as a theme in Mark's gospel; She says: “Mark not only tells Jesus’ story in the first gospel but characterizes Jesus’ disciples in moments of numinous awe that invite hearers of the story to recognize their own fear as the threshold of faith in Jesus” (66). She is suggesting that fear is an entry point and a time to consciously draw nearer to The Christ. He is in the boat, are we letting him sleep late–or sleep until it is too late? More to the point, when he awakens we all awaken!

So, I invite us all to take a moment to speak with God–(yes, right here, in the middle of church!). I invite you to close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so, if not, find a place like the pew rack or on the floor to focus your gaze. And think about a current concern: politics, guns, climate change, or perhaps a personal diagnosis, loss, or change. Choose one thing. Now, rather than ruminate on the outward details, find the feeling it generates for you from within. How does this concern make you feel? How might you share this feeling with Jesus?

(Sung)

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

*Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fear relieved. How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.*

Amen.