



## Sermon for The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

Rev. David Owren

1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23) 32-49    2 Corinthians 6:1-13  
Mark 4: 35-41    Psalm 9:9-20

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

It's good to be with all of you again. Almost a year ago my wife Carol was diagnosed with cancer. Thank you for all your prayers, your words of comfort and the prayer shawl of love you gave to her. The doctors and nurses have given Carol the best of care. Now she is cancer free and her prognosis is good. But the fear of the big "C" always looms in the background as many of you know. And our prayers continue for all of you who are living the same experience.

If you are alive, you have been afraid. According to psychologists "Fear is a natural and biological condition that we all experience. It's important that we experience fear because it keeps us safe."<sup>1</sup> But fear can also be crippling, debilitating, irrational, and overwhelming. As Christians we trust God and believe God's promises. Following Jesus is risky and sometimes scary business. One pastor reminds us that we " need to see that even the realization of [our] worst fear is within God's control. The gospel helps [us] to grasp this, because in the gospel God takes what is evil – the murder of His son – and uses it to accomplish His ultimate plan – the redemption of sinners. To follow this Christ means to accept the reality of suffering, but it also means to accept the goodness of God within that suffering."<sup>2</sup>

Look at the painting by Rembrandt from 1633, titled "Storm on the Sea of Galilee." Rembrandt captures the moment when the disciples of Jesus are in fear of perishing. Rembrandt has painted this boat, tossed by the storm, on a strong diagonal, that creates movement and drama. ...Looking closer we can see that the mainsail of the ship is torn. Even with experienced sailors onboard, the disciples have lost their ability to control how the sail will catch the wind, negating much of their experience. Rembrandt has heightened the desperation of the situation,

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<sup>1</sup> Zachary Sikora, PsyD, [nm.org/healthy-tips/emotional-health/5-things-you-never-knew-about-fear#...](http://nm.org/healthy-tips/emotional-health/5-things-you-never-knew-about-fear#...)

<sup>2</sup> <https://pastordaveonline.org/...>

by painting in the broken rigging that is swinging wildly with a heavy metal block still attached. ...As always though, Rembrandt is calling us to look deeper.

To see how these physical struggles relate to the spiritual, internal lives of the men on this boat. You might have noticed that the mast of the ship forms a cross diagonally against the stormy sky. At this point in the gospel narrative the disciples believe they have found a new rabbi, in moments they will witness the stilling of the sea and realize that Jesus is more than a rabbi, he can command the winds and the sea. Therefore, this story is considered a major transitional moment, the disciples begin to understand that Jesus' mission is more than they imagined. While they could not foresee the cross in Jesus future, the viewers of this painting would familiar with the symbol.

As the boat is tossed on the sea, representing the evil and chaos of life, the cross hints that faith and hope is still there for those who cry out to God. Rembrandt has signed his name on the rudder of the ship.

Rembrandt has incorporated the various ways humankind responds to violence and chaos. Each of the men in this painting realizes that death is eminent, yet each responds differently.

At the bow of the boat, we have five men battling with the rigging and a torn sail. Most likely these are the disciples who worked as fishermen and had some experience with the sudden storms that the Sea of Galilee was known for. Illuminated by the break in the clouds, they have not given up. Continuing to battle the winds and waves they focus what skills they possess to guiding the boat through the storm, we feel they will continue to fight to the end.

Another sailor, at the back of the boat, struggles to hold the tiller to drive the boat at an angle into the wave, their only hope of staying afloat. We can see his strain and focus as he tries to stay the course.

In the back of the boat, we have more disciples. In a realistic moment we have one vomiting over the side of the boat. Another gapes at the oncoming wave with horror on his face. Two kneel, waking Jesus from sleep, appearing angry and distressed.

One disciple sits with his back to us, dressed in white with a hat upon his head. It has been suggested that this disciple has given up, accepted his fate and sits down to wait for the inevitable.

If you look closely, you will see another disciple kneeling in front of Jesus with a faint halo around his head. Only this disciple and Jesus have halos, an interesting detail. Unlike the two disciples angrily waking Jesus, this disciple kneels in faith and waits for Jesus to act, his faith indicated by his halo.

Amidst this chaos, only Christ, at the right, remains calm, like the eye of the storm. Awakened by the disciples' desperate pleas for help, he rebukes them: "Why are you afraid?

By the way, the common Greek word for being afraid is "phobeo" from which we get "phobia" or fear. But the word translated as "afraid" in our text is not "phobeo". It is "deilos", used only three times in the New Testament, an adjective linked with the verb "to be". Therefore, a more accurate translation is, "Why are you being cowardly?

Have you still no faith?"<sup>3</sup>

In moments we know that Jesus will command the winds and sea to "Be still." Interestingly, after he calms the storm the disciple's terror is now redirected to Jesus, in the last phrase of the story: "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" So the disciples have two fears—the fear of dying at the hands of nature and the fear of dying to old ways of living and following Jesus in a new way of radical, unstoppable love.

Finally, we come to the fourteenth man in the boat. Normally, this scene is depicted with 13 men, Christ and the 12 disciples. Rembrandt has painted himself into the scene, holding onto a rope and staring out at the viewer. This direct eye contact seems to invite us to place ourselves into the story, just as the artist has done.

In this painting Rembrandt has offered his viewers a multi-dimensional view into the faith journey of the disciples. We have men who continue to fight the battles life throws at them, men who have given up, men who are just sick, men who look to their leader, and a man who entrusts his life to Jesus. Only the halo hints that Rembrandt favors one choice over the others.

Rembrandt spent his life observing others,... and he documents, with compassion, the various ways humankind

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<sup>3</sup> [https://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-b/proper\\_7b/](https://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-b/proper_7b/)

deals with events outside of their control. It is a fascinating study, and one that should cause each of us to ask questions.<sup>4</sup>

When you look at the disciples in Rembrandt's painting do you see yourself? What is your biggest fear? Is it the chaos and division we see in culture, politics, and religion? Is it family crisis, broken relationships or loneliness? Is it financial, medical or situational? And, like the first disciples, do you also fear to follow Him who calms storms and brings peace to chaos?

When Jesus calls you, are you afraid to follow Him? Do you find ways to avoid commitment? Do you ever feel cowardly for your lack of response? Is the cost of discipleship too high for you? Do you really have faith to trust the promise of our Lord to see you through your fears and cowardice?

Fear can paralyze us. That is why God says "Fear not, Don't be afraid" 365 times in Holy Scripture, one verse for each day of the year. Remember that the next time you are afraid or feel cowardly. God is always with us, especially in times when we feel abandoned, afraid of the dark, seeing no way out. God is there with us, even when we don't think so.

The lessons today declare the abiding presence of God, even when we are afraid. All of Israel was dismayed and afraid of Goliath the Philistine giant. And God sent a young shepherd boy with a sling to defeat him. A hopeless situation turned into a victory by David who believed God would save him.

The psalmist today echoes David's faith in God by declaring that whoever trusts God's promise of refuge in times of trouble will not be forgotten but be embraced. Hope will be kept alive by God's constant presence and victory over what attacks us is guaranteed.

Paul was afraid his ministry at Corinth was a failure. People criticized him and rejected his teaching. He admonished the Corinthians to "let go of their class distinctions and actually love one another." Paul and his companions had given their all, enduring "beatings,

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<sup>4</sup> by [Kelly Bagdanov](#), Rembrandt's Storm on the Sea of Galilee, August 12, 2022.

imprisonments, and riots.” Paul loved the church at Corinth and his heart was open wide to embrace this community that so often gave him fits.<sup>5</sup>

The disciples gathered around Jesus in a boat. We gather around Jesus in worship, prayer and the sharing of His body and blood. And we have the promise of forgiveness which is always new, as new as sin itself. Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid. Don’t be a coward. Follow me.”

David took a risk. The psalmist took a risk. Paul took a risk. The disciples took risks. Are we willing to take risks?

The scholar of Hebrew scripture Walter Brueggemann wrote: ...It is the work of the gospel to empower ordinary individual persons to such risks;

...It is the intent of the good news to assign fresh agency to erstwhile cowards.

...It is...the work of the church to invite individual persons away from complacent followership to risky leadership.

The gospel is the news that the world is not and cannot finally be shut down in fear. It is the Spirit of the creator God who recruits those who are fearful to embrace the “things hoped for,” who act in a “conviction of things not seen”.<sup>6</sup>

The work of faith is not yet finished. When we are afraid or when we “chicken out” God is with us, calling us to be the love of God for all the world to see and experience. As the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard put it: “...it is not what happens to me that makes me great, but what I do,”.<sup>7</sup>

I was a police chaplain with the Fortuna Police Department in northern California. One day I received a call to respond to a situation at our local hospital. There was a man visiting the hospital who refused to leave. His wife had died and he was afraid. He was lost in a new world without the love of his life. The doctors, nurses and police officers tried to convince him to go home, but to no avail. When all else fails, call the chaplain.

When I arrived, he was very agitated. He walked in circles nervously, muttering under his breath. I introduced myself and invited him to a room where we could talk. He was so upset

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<sup>5</sup> Bob Cornwall, Ponderings on A Faith Journey, June 21, 2012, “Want to Hear a Story of Faith?”

<https://www.bobcornwall.com/2012/06/want-to-hear-story-of-faith-lectionary.html>

<sup>6</sup> Day1 website, Walter Brueggemann: Profiles in Cowardice, Wednesday June 22, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling

that he didn't respond to me at first. I spoke to him softly and assured him that he was not alone. I encouraged him to entertain the possibility that in his new world, his love for his wife and her love for him still remained intact. After a while he felt comfortable enough to go home. I broke police protocol and offered him a ride in my car. He was still a bit agitated and I was nervous. I prayed for a peaceful transit and drove him home. As I said good-bye I told him that he will always be loved and his wife rests in the arms of God's love that never ends.

That day we both were afraid. We had entered a new world of the unknown. One of us faced life without his beloved. And the other faced life with an agitated, possibly violent person. In the chaos of that encounter, Jesus said, "Peace! Be still!" We both responded to God's all-powerful love and experienced firsthand a new way of living for each other.

As you launch your boat this week into a world of chaos, risk, and fear, remember the disciples in the boat with Jesus. They were afraid of a world that threatened to kill them and they were a bit cowardly to follow the one who could calm storms. Jesus is with you in your boat, calling you to follow Him. How will you respond? Are you afraid of the storms of life? Do you lack the courage to accept the invitation to follow?

Your faith is enough. Believe your Lord and Savior who is in your boat calming the storms in your life giving you peace in a new way of living. Sharing the Good News of God's love for every person you meet and every situation you encounter. Hear again the voice of Jesus, "Peace! Be still! Follow me and be the love that changes and redeems the world." Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.