

How to Overcome Fear

I Samuel 17:32-47; Mark 4:35-41

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The date was January 15, 1933, just before Hitler came to power in Germany. The preacher was the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was a time of great tension in Berlin. The government was teetering on the brink of collapse. There was fear of Communism—the “Red Tide from the East”—and other extremist movements. Fear was widespread in Germany, so Bonhoeffer titled his sermon, “Overcoming Fear.” It was based on the story I read earlier about Jesus calming the storm. This is what he told the congregation:

But the human being doesn't have to be afraid; we should not be afraid! That is what makes humans different from all other creatures. In the midst of every situation where there is no way out, where nothing is clear, where it is our fault, we know that there is hope, and this hope is called: Thy will be done.... (Political Theology Network)

What is fear? According to an article in *Psychology Today*, “fear is an emotional response induced by a perceived threat.” It causes a change in our brain and in other organs of the body. (Alex Niles, “What Is Fear?”, May 19, 2014) Fear is what causes the fight or flight response. When a dangerous situation presents itself—say a bear ambles onto your hiking path—do you find a way to defend yourselves, or do you flee for safety? Feeling fear is human. It’s the way we’re wired. It protects us from danger. We could even go so far as to say that fear is good and healthy.

Sometimes. Until it begins to control our life. Then this good, healthy emotion becomes an enemy. It can paralyze us, steal our joy, rob us of relationships, and stop us from living.

How then do we overcome fear? That was Bonhoeffer's question in 1933 Germany. I ask it again today: How do we overcome this paralyzing, life-stealing form of fear?

The situation Mark describes in our text would have been very frightening, even for experienced fishermen. At least four of the disciples were professional fishermen, and surely they had experienced storms on the water. Mark calls it "a great windstorm." The waves beat against the boat, and the boat began to take on water. When I went to Israel a few years ago, we took a boat ride onto the Sea of Galilee. It was supposedly a boat like Jesus and his disciples would have used, except for the gasoline powered engine. We had about 12-15 people on the boat. And thankfully a calm day! It was actually quite peaceful listening to the gentle waves lapping against the side of the boat. Some of the people were softly singing hymns. I can only imagine what it would be like to be caught in a great windstorm. In a boat that size. And for the boat to begin taking on water! I can imagine it would be very frightening.

Do you remember what Jesus was doing? He was asleep in the stern of the boat. For you who are nautically challenged, that is the back of the boat. Mark says Jesus was in the back of the boat sleeping on a cushion.

The disciples woke Jesus, and their question is quite telling. They asked Jesus, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Notice they called him "teacher" instead of "Lord." At that moment, he was only their teacher. And they questioned whether he cared.

Jesus did not panic. In the Greek text, Jesus spoke only two words: "peace, silence!"

And Mark says, "the wind ceased, and there was dead calm."

Jesus then asked the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Am I missing something? Wasn't this a frightening situation? It wasn't exactly a bear ambling onto their hiking path, but it was still

frightening. We are wired to respond to threatening situations with fear. Yet Jesus thought there was no reason to fear.

Two observations. First, the early church saw this story as a message of encouragement to the church. A ship was often a symbol of for the church. This story presented a picture of the church in a time of violent persecution, a great windstorm. The church leaders were terrified. Can we survive? Will these storms destroy us and our boat? What are we to do? And the message of this story for the church was this: the Lord is present. Jesus is in the boat and will bring the church safely through its time of trial. (R. Allan Culpepper, "Mark," *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*, p. 161) Peace. Silence.

Churches have reasons to be concerned today too. Across the board churches are in a time of shrinkage. If you're under 40, think about how many of your friends and co-workers attend church. Many young adults are choosing not to participate in local churches. It doesn't mean they are bad people or that they aren't spiritually sensitive. Sociologists call them the "nones" and "dones." When asked their religious preference, they check the box that says "none." When churches try to recruit them, they say, "I'm done with the church." The number one reason they give for their withdrawal is the churches' over-involvement in secular politics. "Churches have sold their soul to a political party," they charge. "Churches condone behavior and policies that contradict their core values. Churches," some of them are saying, "have lost their way."

Some of us are very concerned. We are anxious, frightened disciples of Jesus Christ. A great windstorm is blowing, and it's going to get worse. We need to be reminded that the Lord is present. Jesus is in the boat and will bring the church safely through its time of trial.

The second observation is more personal. This story is a message of encouragement for you and me individually. It speaks to the individual who is in a great windstorm. I want to be careful here to not sound flippant. The great windstorm the disciples were caught in was not flippant. They feared for their lives. Maybe something is causing such fear in your life. Maybe a health scare. The failure of a marriage. A wayward son or daughter. A professional crisis.

I have a colleague who has gone through a major upheaval in his church over the issue of same sex marriage. It's such a hard issue for churches to address. Many families left the church. At the same time, his sister has a rare disease and is dying. I was told Thursday that she is in heart failure. Last week his elderly parents were in a car wreck. Both sustained injuries.

Here's where I don't want this to sound flippant. I want to say to him that a great windstorm is blowing in his life, but the Lord is present. Jesus is in the boat, and when the Lord is present, we have hope. Peace. Silence.

As Hitler came to power in Germany, many top theologians and other intellectuals fled the country. Not Bonhoeffer. He stayed and organized opposition to Hitler and Nazism. He believed so strongly that it was his Christian duty to oppose Hitler that he participated in a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler. He was sent to concentration camp. He was hanged days before allied forces liberated the camp. Here's what a brilliant theologian, a man of principle, a man of courage, a man of God, told his people in that sermon from 1933:

We name the One who overcame fear and led it captive in the victory procession, who nailed it to the cross and committed it to oblivion; we name the One who is the shout of victory of humankind redeemed from the fear of death—Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Living One. He alone is Lord over fear; it knows him as its master; it gives way to him alone. So look to Christ when you are afraid, think of Christ, keep him before your eyes, call upon Christ and pray to him, believe that he is with you now, helping you . . . Then fear will grow pale and fade away, and you will be free, through your faith in our strong and living Savior, Jesus Christ. (Political Theology Network)

He's right. We don't have to be afraid. We should not be afraid. This is what makes humans different. We have hope. And this hope is called: Thy will be done. I pray that you can believe that, and that it will help you overcome paralyzing, life stealing fear.

Closing Prayer

Lord who calms the storms, Lord of hope, see us all safely through our time of trial. Amen.