

Flipping Fear to Faith

1 Kings 19: 9-15a Matthew 13: 22-33

There are a lot of notable quotes about fear, some quite clever. My favorite clever one is that “fear is the darkroom where negatives are developed.”

Fear is a real thing and not easily dismissed with some notable quote. We’ve had plenty of fearfulness to consider in the past week as the latest addition to the nuclear family, the rogue nation North Korea, demonstrated its capabilities and exchanged bellicose posturing with the President of the United States. While our President is known to yield to impulsive, unscripted outbursts, his tough talk was quite scripted, then repeated, suggesting that the starkly fearsome imagery and Rambo-style expressions put forward a strategic purpose developed at some level in the White House.

While it still seems to be bellicose posturing on both sides, there will be occasions coming up soon when joint military exercises between the US and South Korea could provoke a more intense exchange. Each side expects to intimidate the other in a game of nuclear chicken, playing on the fear that their side would act pre-emptively and force the other to back down. If you weren’t afraid about what was going on, and don’t remain fearful about what coming weeks could bring, I’d say you have a problem.

We know the White House has been in disarray, the State Department is in shambles, and the Pentagon doesn’t have a close working relationship with the President and his senior staff. This confused mess is facing a regime in North Korea that is unlike most any other country, and certainly unlike any country in possession of nuclear weaponry. North Korea is a dark place with outlandish beliefs and riddled with fears about every other nation. The likelihood of rational minds working this out seems quite thin. If they don’t, then it gets really scary.

Fear isn’t easily mastered here, and blithe sayings don’t provide much assurance. A shaky, old rope bridge across a deep gorge doesn’t inspire courageous resolve, but fear. It isn’t courageous to push past the fear and walk out onto that swaying, creaking old rope bridge. That’s stupidly tempting tragedy. Something more enables us to move past fear and into purpose. Our scriptures lead us into the topic with two very different stories.

As the Elijah story begins, God asks the prophet a probing question: *What are you doing here, Elijah?* That probing question, with a hint of *I-already-know-what-you’re-doing-and-I-disapprove*, is how God confronts Elijah.

Previously, Elijah had successfully contested the priests of Baal who were mostly killed in the aftermath by Elijah’s followers. Wimpy King Ahab went off with his tail between his legs, but when Queen Jezebel found out what happened, she sent word of her promise to kill Elijah in retaliation. Elijah wisely took the message to heart and fled the coming persecution.

Despairing, Elijah sits under a broom tree in the desert and asks God to take his life because he's such a failure. In that depressed state, an angel comes and ministers to him. Twice the angel brings the prophet a loaf and water to nourish his strength. Another 40 days journey brought him to Mt. Horeb (Sinai) where he hid out in a cave.

While in the cave, that's when God speaks to Elijah with that damning question, *What are you doing here, Elijah?*

Elijah proceeds to explain his whole travail, really at his wit's end: *I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only left, and now they are trying to kill me, too.*

Elijah seems to have forgotten a number of details. For instance, how it was that Elijah, prophet of God triumphed over the priests of Baal and Asherah. That was God's work. Elijah also seems to have forgotten how he survived his desperate flight across the desert. That was God's work, too.

Elijah needs to know God again, to understand the power and the presence of God. Elijah needs to know that he isn't alone in this, and never has been.

So God promises to show his presence to Elijah, calling him to the mouth of the cave. First, a terrible wind strips the mountain's rocks. That's followed by a thunderous earthquake. Finally comes a ferocious firestorm. In all these awesome events, the text tells the listener that God was **not** in any of them.

Then comes (literally in Hebrew) *the sound of fine silence* known familiarly as a "still, small voice," as a whisper. In fact, God is known to Elijah in the **utter silence** that comes *after* the dramatic displays of power.

Then that sacred voice returns, repeating the first question: *What are you doing here, Elijah?* Elijah repeats his earlier answer, exact same words as first time. This repetition shows that for Elijah, nothing's changed. Elijah doesn't get the point of God's demonstration. God is not simply a visible power showcased by a dramatic intervention in the natural order. Rather God is an active presence that's often unnoticed, unheard, and unrecognized amid the din and fury of other things happening. Only when all is quiet can God be recognized.

Elijah had lost sight of God in the swift turn from victory to adversity. Elijah's vision for God's work was lost when adversity came upon him. He saw himself as if alone and as a failure.

In fact, God had been there all along, ministering to him in victory, ministering to him again in defeat. God ministered to him on the desert trek of despair, and ministered to him now on the mountaintop. God has *always* been there, the power behind and beyond the authority given to Elijah. Elijah simply doesn't know which way to go or what to do.

So God has to spell it out: *Go back the way you came*. God simply says: ‘your work isn't done, and you hiding out here in the desert won't accomplish it.’ Elijah wasn't called merely to sit and complain about misfortune in the presence of God. He was called to serve, authorized to act, and empowered to do his mission. God graciously turns around his servant and sends him back to complete the still unfolding process of his sacred will.

A story is told of a child who had to walk each evening past a dark, spooky house. Some adults sought to give him courage. One handed him a good luck charm to ward off the ghosts. Another had a light put on a pole on the dreaded corner. Still another said earnestly, "It is sinful to be afraid. Trust God and be brave!"

Then someone said, "I know what it is to be afraid. I will walk with you past the house." This person did nothing to remove the fear, except to lift it from the child's shoulders and place it on their own. Fear is no longer immobilizing because someone is with you and you can move once again with purpose.

Moving to the next story in Matthew's gospel, after the feeding of the five thousand which we discussed last week, Jesus sends the disciples ahead of him across the lake. Matthew takes the story from Mark where the story is used more cryptically to show the weakness of the disciples who cannot overcome the storm that would prevent them from reaching the other side. The setting of the stormy waves amid the storm and the image of Jesus walking out to the disciples across the water are too rich for Matthew to pass up.

In Matthew, all the same elements are there as in Mark, the storm against the disciples, Jesus walking out to them, the disciples fearful, and Jesus reassuring them. Then, unlike in Mark, it becomes a story about Peter, a favorite character of Matthew's.

Peter wants proof apparently that it is Jesus out there and not some fake person walking around on the water or some weird hallucination. The proof would be that Peter should walk on the water to Jesus at his Lord's command.

Jesus issues the command, "Come," and Peter starts walking out to Jesus on the water. That's right; Peter has stepped out the boat and is walking on water toward Jesus. This is pretty awesome. Peter must be stunned along with the rest of the disciples watching this.

Then a gust of wind whips into Peter and he has a sudden moment of awareness which the text calls *fear*. In a split second, that euphoria is swept aside by a couple of realizations. First, Peter realizes that he is indeed walking on water, immediately followed by the awareness that he has **no business** walking on water ... **away** from a perfectly good boat ... amid a **raging storm**. He starts to sink fast, but Jesus grabs Peter, asking "Why did you doubt?"

Once back in the boat, the storm subsides and the disciples finally declare on this occasion, *Truly you are the Son of God*. Apparently they had been unconvinced by the events of the previous 13 chapters, and now finally have come to the conclusion that Jesus is the Son of God at the midway point in Matthew's gospel.

What we see in Peter is the one who had the audacity to step out of the boat and walk on the water. Jesus had already shown that walking on water was nothing too remarkable. Now Peter did it, and would have been running laps around the boat in the storm, except he had that moment of awareness, the realization that he was in over his head and didn't really know what he was doing. Fear captured his spirit. Despite having Jesus in front of him, he felt alone and his fear took over his ability to continue moving forward, and he began to sink. It was a time for faith in the One who had called him out on the stormy waters, who was there with him. But fear and doubt distracted him from the promise of God, the promise that was within his grasp.

The fear or faith moment for us is when we're trying something rather different and intimidating, walking off the boat and on to the top of the water, maybe amid some storm that we're experiencing. We're quite likely to recoil in fear and doubt, but God will abide with us if we're determined in our faithfulness, if we're seeking God's presence and direction. Jesus didn't abandon Peter but continued to work with him and through him, just as God would work with and through Elijah.

Both Elijah and Peter succumbed to fear and became immobilized. For neither of them was it possible to continue until they found assurance of the presence of God and Jesus, making the spiritual connection that made them whole and gave them empowerment.

It's the same for us. We can flip fear to faith when we realize that we're not alone, that we're making our way forward with One who can lead us through to a conclusion. When fear renders us paralyzed, then fear has taken over where God wants to be in our lives, filling a spiritual vacuum. With faith in the One who calls us child of God, we can face the storm, step out into the midst of it, and yes, we can walk on water to our Lord and Savior who is there with us and leading our way forward.