



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Afraid of God? Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Devotees of the Peanuts® cartoon strip know that among his many ambitions, Snoopy longs to be a writer and publish the next great American mystery novel. How many times have we turned to the comics page and found Snoopy seated on top of his doghouse, hunched over his typewriter, tapping those words onto paper that he thinks will ultimately bring him fame: “It was a dark and stormy night.”?

Any good horror or mystery movie takes advantage of the disorientation of a fierce storm and the flickering images created by flashes of lightning to intensify the story and create an atmosphere of terror. The writer of the Gospel of John could easily have used Snoopy’s famous line to introduce the story we just heard about Jesus walking on water. The disciples had left Jesus on shore when they started their trip back home. After rowing a few miles in the dark, a storm overtook them. Wind and waves on the sea at night are frightening enough, but suddenly, a flash of lightning (no doubt accompanied by a teeth-rattling clap of thunder) revealed what looked like a human form—of all things—walking on the water toward them. Who wouldn’t be frightened to see someone or some-thing walking toward them on the water in the midst of a storm?

It had been a full day for Jesus and the disciples. They had been traveling back and forth across the sea to find a deserted place where they could be alone and talk about their recent preaching tour. Yet, every place they went, people found them and rushed to Jesus for healing and teaching. Earlier that day, just as they got settled on a nice hill overlooking the sea, the crowds came from everywhere like uninvited ants to a picnic. The disciples were frustrated, but Jesus seemed amused. He even goaded his friends by asking how they were going to feed all of those people. As we know, they pretty much threw up their hands and said, “It’s impossible!” but Jesus insisted they find a way. Andrew, perhaps being a tad sarcastic, noted that one little boy had five loaves and two fish to share. I expect the other disciples chuckled until Jesus said, “That will do!” and told them to have everyone sit down for lunch. Jesus blessed the donated lunch and had the

disciples pass it around. As the story goes, there were twelve baskets of bread left over.

New Testament scholar Gerald Borchert points out that this chapter in John's Gospel invites us to compare what Jesus does to what Moses did. Through Moses, God "calmed the sea," making safe passage to freedom for the Hebrew children possible. God provided manna in the desert for the people to eat. God led them through the wilderness in order to teach them and prepare them for the Promised Land.¹

In this story, Jesus takes his disciples to a deserted place, which for him was a place of discovery and enlightenment. He, too, fed the people in a miraculous way and, when the disciples' safety was threatened by tempestuous waters, Jesus tamed the waters insure safe passage for his friends.

I suppose that, under the circumstances, any of us would have been afraid to see a figure moving on the raging waters which threatened to swamp the boat. After all, people do not walk on water, so what was this creature or ghost coming to them in the storm? Even when they realized it was Jesus, the fear might not have subsided. After all, who does that? Who walks on water and multiplies bread and heals people and does a lot of other unexplainable things?

This little detail attached to a much larger story about Jesus meeting basic human needs, teaching, preaching, healing, and offering hope made me wonder. When you look at this Jesus—this man who speaks with authority about life now and life eternally, who looks on the rest of us with compassion, who heals and encourages and challenges and loves—what is there to fear? Yet, the disciples were terrified when he approached their boat. It makes me wonder if we all aren't a bit afraid of Jesus. Are we afraid of God?

Over and over and over scripture admonishes us to "fear the Lord." The book of Proverbs advises us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:8). There is plenty of heart-stopping, blood chilling fear in the Bible, but in terms of our relationship to God, scripture teaches us that the "fear of the Lord" is better understood as the awe, reverence, and holy respect with which we approach God. We remember Isaiah's vision of being in the presence of God when he feared for his life because no mortal was supposed to get that close to God. His fear was that his uncleanness would undo him but God purified him and then invited him to be God's

¹Gerald L. Borchert, "John," in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, eds. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 1057.

prophet. True reverence and awe, understanding who God is and who we are, is the gateway to drawing closer to the heart of God.

I have a suspicion, however, that many of us, if not all of us, are truly afraid of God at some level. Years ago, an eleven year old boy admitted to his father, “Sometimes I’m afraid when I read the Bible.”² Granted, at the time the young man was working on an assignment about Genesis 19 and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah where we discover violent and violating behavior toward strangers who are guests of Lot. We are shocked to the core when Lot offers his daughters as an appeasement to the angry mob at his door and then horrified when hellfire and brimstone from heaven destroy the twin cities. As Harry Emerson Fosdick pointed out years ago, Israel’s understanding of God in those ancient days was of a god of storms who used nature to awe and intimidate, a god of war who defended his people and sometimes punished them with the sword of their enemies, and a tribal god whose primary concern was the Hebrew people.³ Who wouldn’t be afraid of that God?

I suspect that sometimes when we read the Bible we do become afraid of God. Today, however, we are fortunate to know God through his manifestation as Jesus the Christ. Apart from his warnings to the religious leaders to clean up their act and the episode in the temple courtyard when he drove out the moneychangers for profaning the temple of God, Jesus did very little to stir fear in the people around him. In fact, he invited people to come to him, to share their burdens, to trust his love, to be honest and unashamed in his presence. He described himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep and the merciful father who welcomes his errant children back home. Why would we fear the God who brings us hope and life and grace?

In thinking about why we might be afraid of God, it occurred to me that our fear of God might well rest in our fear that we are not good enough for God. I don’t mean simply that we are not morally good enough, although that in itself is always a concern. I mean that perhaps deep within me there lies the fear that God does not want *me*. In Mark’s version of this story, Jesus is on land and the disciples are in the boat when a storm blows up. He sees that they are struggling and walks out onto the water. Yet, Mark tells us that Jesus intended to walk past them (Mark 6:48) until they cried out in fear. He reassured them, calmed the storm, and they made it safely to shore.

²Ryan Dueck, “Sometimes I’m Afraid of God.” *The Christian Century Blogs Network* (February 20, 2013); available online at: <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2013-02/sometimes-im-afraid-god>.

³Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The Idea of God,” *A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938); accessed online at *Religion Online*: <http://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-1-the-idea-of-god/>.

Sometimes, when storms are raging or I find myself in a deserted place or I am hungry for food that will nourish my spirit or I am simply honest with myself about who I am, I am afraid that Jesus might just walk on by because I am not worthy of his love and concern. I suspect that the Hebrew slaves felt that God had forgotten them as they toiled away in Egypt. There were many times they felt abandoned or forgotten in their long trek to the Promised Land. Maybe there is within us all the fear that God may love the world—but not me.

Of course, the Gospel works hard to dispel that fear. Jesus declared that he had come to earth to demonstrate God's love to each and every one of us, to seek us out when we are lost or hiding, and to do anything necessary to convince us of his love. When they paid attention, the Hebrew people wandering toward the Promised Land realized that God had calmed many storms and traversed numerous seas to rescue them. God had nourished them with physical bread as well as with bread from heaven. God had always loved them with an incomparable love. When we open our eyes and ears and hearts, we also realize that God does love us each and every one.

Maybe that is what we are afraid of. Fulton Sheen, the late bishop in the Roman Catholic Church, wrote, "Most souls are afraid of God precisely because of His Goodness . . . Our greatest fear is not that God may not love us enough but that He may love us too much."⁴

Afraid that God might love us too much? That's a thought that came like a bolt out of the blue! Yet, we have known love from another person—from a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend—that is so pure and intense as to frighten us. I am not talking about a love that attempts to smother and overwhelm you. That kind of love is actually selfish. I am talking about the kind of love that never gives up, that holds out hope when hope is nowhere in sight, that desires only the best for us and does anything in its power to secure it. I am talking about love that wants nothing for itself other than the well-being of the one who is loved.

I suspect that we see this love best in a parent who loves a child despite his destructive ways or in a child who loves a parent even when the parent ignores her basic needs. We surely see it in God who for untold millennia did everything possible to demonstrate his love to us and finally came to live among us as one of us. We see it in Jesus whose compassion never allowed him to turn away a needy soul and whose righteousness burned hot against anyone who harmed or took advantage of another person. We see this love in God on a cross, crucified like a common thief, abandoned by even his

⁴Fulton J. Sheen, *Peace of Soul*, (1949) as cited in *The World Treasury of Religious Quotations*, Ralph L. Woods, ed. (New York City: Garland Books, 1966), 331.

closest friends. And we see this unfathomable love in the garden of resurrection where Jesus opens his arms wide to welcome each of us into life that is full and complete.

The Apostle Paul, himself a persecutor of Christians, experienced this love of God which forgave and redeemed him. In an attempt to help the rest of us begin to understand how God thinks about us, he wrote:

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:18-19

I pray that you will know the full dimensions of God's love for you, Paul wrote. Granted, when we do fully comprehend that love which will not let us go, which traverses the landscape of our lives to provide us with all that we need, which walks into the storms of our lives and brings us calm, which heals the wounds of life, and offers us life such as we have not yet imagined we might be afraid. We might be afraid that we do not deserve such love. We might be afraid that we do not measure up. We might be afraid that we will let God down. We might be afraid that we cannot begin to return such a love to God.

Those fears are justified, but not acceptable to God. The same God who saw the crowds coming in swarms of need and inadequacy looks upon us with Jesus' eyes of compassion. The same God who recognized the hunger of the crowd and the inability of his disciples to believe in the power God gives us also sees our hunger and our unbelief. The same God who created the water and wind and waves created us and promised never to abandon us. The same God who loved the world enough to send his only Son—himself—so that the world would not perish also loves you and me into eternal life.

We may be afraid of the love of God—and that is understandable. But God's love throws out all fear. All we have to do is accept it in faith and enjoy the gift of life it brings.

There is in Bray, England, an ancient hotel which has weathered many a storm. On the mantel of the Hind's Head Inn are carved these words: "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there."⁵ Amen.

⁵*The World Treasury of Religious Quotations*, 1057.

July 29, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How grateful we are, O God, that you are the shepherd of our heart and our lives. We know that no matter where we go or what we do, you are with us. Sometimes that means that you have to pull us out of thickets in which we have entangled ourselves. On other occasions you have to come looking for us when we have strayed. Often you are protecting us from threats outside and sometimes from things that threaten us from within. There are days when we make you happy by the life we lead and other days that we break your heart because of the life we lead. Always you hold us with a love that will not let us fall completely from your care. Thank you.

It is obvious that we need you, O God, and we suspect that you need us as well. You have given us amazing abilities and gifts to use in service to one another. Help us not to waste these talents, we pray. You have gifted us with minds that can reason and imagine and overcome some of the most puzzling circumstances imaginable. Enable us to use this gift for good and never to abandon our capacity to think and discern the right thing to do. You have endowed us with the ability to love as you have loved us. Empower us to use this gift generously and wisely as we seek to make this world the garden of life you dreamed it would be. Help us to be the people you created us to be, O God.

Hold us, we pray, in those times when illness threatens us. Enable us to take advantage of all the medical resources you provide and to choose wisely what is best for us. Hold us when the light of life dims and we no longer take delight in each day. Help us to find a way back to the goodness we know is inherent in life itself. Hold onto us when we feel as if we will surely fall or choose the wrong path or simply do nothing. Guide us when perplexed, we pray. Hold us, O God, in difficult times and in times of joy, when life is good and we enjoy every breath we take. Hold us, O God, and never let us go.

Thank you for this resilient and expansive love that we are discovering with you. May we recognize it as the source and sustenance of life itself and as the core of who we are and can be. Thank you, O God, for loving us in this moment, for that is enough; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.