

## Third Sunday after Pentecost

**Sermon Text:** Mark 4:35-41

**Theme:** *“What are you afraid of?”*

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

What are the things you are afraid of? Genuinely afraid of, not just upset that you might miss out on a favourite TV show, or miss a game of golf or an anticipated fishing trip. What are you afraid of?

This is an important question but it won't be popular because we don't like to dwell on our fears. To fear something is to acknowledge that we aren't in control of the situation but rather someone or something else may determine your future.

Listen again to the disciples in today's gospel reading as their boat is threatened by wind and waves. “The disciples woke Jesus and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?’”

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

### **What are the things that make us afraid?**

We have already heard from Jesus' disciples who were afraid of the wind and waves which were crashing into their boat, threatening to swamp them. Now the Sea of Galilee was well known for its wind storms which would begin all of a sudden, but then die down just as quickly. The lake was nestled amid the surrounding hills and the winds would often funnel in from the south, creating great tempests upon the sea. Clearly these would be dangerous, especially if encountered at night. We should remember however that these were seasoned fishermen who would have experienced all manner of conditions on the Sea of Galilee. That they would be so afraid says a lot about the stormy conditions on this particular evening.

Now what do we see if we dig a little deeper however? The thing the disciples, these hardy fishermen were most afraid of was not the storm, but that the storm might end their lives! Isn't this fear of death and dying the very thing that clutches at the hearts of so many people throughout the history of the world? Are there other examples of God's people being afraid for their lives?

We don't have to go too far at all to see the results of sin and the deadly impact it has on humanity. Adam and Eve were warned not to eat the forbidden fruit for on the day they eat it, they would surely die. Even with the warning ringing in their ears, they still couldn't resist the temptation Satan put before them and so they disobeyed God. Later on, God was looking for Adam and Eve so they too could enjoy all that he has created in fellowship with him. But of course, Adam and Eve were hiding because they knew they had sinned, they recognised they were naked, and they feared for their lives. Adam and Eve did die that day. Not a physical death, but a spiritual death as they were cut off from direct fellowship with God. As a result of Adam and Eve's sin, all humanity begins life separated from God and with the penalty of death hanging over them.

From this earliest fear of death, we read of death being something people constantly feared. When Moses was leading God's people from Egyptian slavery, you will remember how they seemed trapped between the waters of the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army which was bearing down on them. So much did the people fear death, they said they would have preferred slavery, rather than face death at the hands of Pharaoh.

Of course this is not the only fear God's people faced. What about King David? When Bathsheba told David she was pregnant, so fearful was the king, he resorted to trickery and finally murder so his adultery would remain undiscovered.

Sometimes it is easier to talk about the fears of people who are removed to us through the pages of the Bible or the passing of years. But what about us today? What are the things which you might be afraid of? Is it a fear of dying? Perhaps it is the fear of what kind of death awaits you? Maybe it is the fear of losing you job, or not being appreciated for the things you do – and the list could go on. There are many things people are afraid of, but what usually stands behind our fears is the fear of death or the changing of our lifestyle in a manner that is not in keeping with our plans or intentions.

### **The fear of the Lord**

Of course there is one fear that we haven't yet touched upon. If you remember back to you confirmation days, you will remember the Small Catechism and Luther's explanation to the Ten Commandments. When answering what each commandment means, Luther always begins – “We should fear and love God”. As Christians, what does it mean to fear God? Isn't God supposed to be a loving God? Why and how should we fear him?

In the first place, we seemed to have lost our fear of God in our church today. There used to be a saying, “That’ll put the fear of God into you!” which whilst a little presumptuous, it did recognise that the fear of God was something that could be expected. In our individualistic culture today where so much of our music and so many of our stories paint God and especially Jesus to be our buddy and mate, we struggle with the idea that God will also judge us, and Christians first of all. And yet that is exactly what God’s Word teaches us – there will be a judgement on the last day and God will stand in judgement of you and me and all people. Now I can’t and won’t answer for you, but when I consider my standing before God, if my salvation was up to me alone, I would be terrified – I don’t deserve God’s eternal salvation!

It is for this same reason that Peter, James and John fell to their faces on the Mount of Transfiguration. They were given a glimpse of Jesus’ divinity and they were terrified for they knew they were unworthy to be in the presence of God who is perfect and so they expected they would die.

Now consider how the disciples reacted in the boat as they were travelling across the Sea of Galilee. These seasoned fishermen *were* afraid of the wind and the waves and rather than turn to their own experience and abilities to remain safe, they turn to Jesus who they were beginning to recognise as their teacher and leader. And how do they react when Jesus does what they had hoped, rescuing them, not by good sailing advice, but by commanding nature to behave by have the wind and waves die down?

Before we answer that, remember Jesus question to his disciples? “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” Jesus is turning his disciples from thinking about saving their earthly lives to the matter of faith and what might happen to the eternal lives. Now when we think of how the disciples react, we remember – “they were filled with *great* fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?’” (Mk 4:41). If the disciples were afraid of the wind and waves, now they really began to be afraid for they were beginning to realise that Jesus wasn’t just a great teacher, but that just maybe he was truly the Son of God. And if Jesus was the Son of God, that meant he had the ability to save, but he also had the ability to judge and so the lives of these men were truly in Jesus’ hands.

### **A loving fear that conquers all other fears**

Now it is important for you to hear that the fear of God is not a bad thing. To our hearts which ache for a loving God it may sound odd but by fearing God we learn to love him. Let me illustrate this. My mum is visiting my family this week. When I was a little boy growing up, I was afraid of mum. Or more to the point, I was afraid of mum getting mad with my brother and I, then inviting dad to get mad with us. That had consequences, and they weren’t always happy ones! You see what my brother and I feared were the consequences of the things we did which caused mum and dad to get mad with us. But in the process, we also learned. Mum and dad taught us many things which helped equip us for living in this world. By listening to them and by living with the consequences of their disciplining of us, we gained some worldly wisdom. Now mum and dad never disciplined us for their fun but because they loved us. It was their love for us that they cared enough to punish us when we did wrong. Now that I am older, I no longer am afraid of them but I love them *because* they were prepared to discipline me when I was young.

In very much the same way, God disciplines us – he teaches us in order that we might learn that our actions, our thoughts and our words have consequences. If we believe and understand that God holds our lives in his hands and that he has the power to judge us according to his Word, according to his commandments, we should fear him. Just like the consequences of upsetting my dad were sometimes painful, so too the consequences of having God judge you and find you wanting will be painful, but unlike the earthly pain or discomfort we get from parental discipline, God’s judgement is eternal. And where our parents, or our bosses, or our teachers may sometimes get it wrong, with God, his judgement is perfect – people will truly get what they deserve.

And so now when we consider God’s judgement, we, like Jesus’ disciples, might be filled with great fear. We might examine our own lives and find that we are wanting, that we haven’t kept the Ten Commandments and therefore we do deserve God’s punishment in time and in eternity. But God doesn’t leave us in this place. Instead he wraps his loving arms around you and draws you into his peace and safety. He stills the winds and waves of your life and invites you to learn from him and to ask for forgiveness in the place of punishment.

The fear of God drives out all other fears because Jesus puts them into their proper perspective. The disciples feared for their lives but in the presence of Jesus what did it matter whether they live or die, they were with their Lord. Whatever challenges you face this day, know and trust that Jesus is also with you and his presence drives away all other fears for no matter what happens, you are with your Lord and Saviour. This day if you are asked, “What are you afraid of?” answer with confidence, “I am afraid of the Lord – and I trust in the peace that he brings to my life.”

And the may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.