

Proper 14, Year A (RCL) – *Faith and Fear*

1 Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-10; Matthew 14:22-33; Psalm 85:8-13

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There are some in this congregation who are old enough to remember the immortal words of Franklin Roosevelt, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” How right he was. Fear itself can be so debilitating that it renders ourselves incapable of doing anything about the thing we fear.

I read a story about a Russian railroad employee who accidentally locked himself inside a refrigerator car. He tried every means to attract outside attention but without success. Since he knew of no way that he could extricate himself, he came to accept his fate. As his life ebbed away, he scribbled notes on the wall of the car. He wrote, “I’m becoming colder...I’m becoming still colder...I’m freezing to death...I’m so numb I can barely write...I’m getting sleepy, these may be my last words.” And so, when they opened the car, they found him dead. They also found that the cooling coils in the car were inoperable. There was plenty of air and the temperature was a bearable 56 degrees. He simply died of fear.

I experienced debilitating fear on my recent trek in Nepal. I have a problem with acrophobia, the fear of heights. Sadly, I failed to read the Lonely Planet description of the Manaslu trek we were on before we started. It said, “If you have a fear of heights don’t even think about this trek.” Well, I was struggling with my fear in the early days of the trek as we climbed along narrow precipices, hundreds of feet up as we made our way along the Gandak river gorge. Then we came to a place where the trail had completely fallen away and in its place, someone had tied two skinny branches together with who knows what and laid them across the opening. You will all see a picture of this contraption next month when I give my slide show. I took one look and said to myself, “OK, I’m done. Time to turn around and go home.”

As I pondered my fate, one of my fellow trekkers went around me and started to cross the makeshift bridge and became paralyzed with fear himself. I had no choice but to go out there and help him cross. This act made me forget my own fear and cross the precipice myself without incident. In addition, having seen that I could accomplish this crossing, I was able to handle other dangerous crossings without fear. The fellow I had helped also overcame his fear to the point where he was able to risk his own neck to save a porter who was starting to slide down a steep glacier.

Fear is something we encounter ourselves all the time. Today we fear what the weak economy will do to us. Will our retirement savings dwindle to nothing? Will our jobs be in jeopardy? Will the elections this year bring an administration that will raise taxes? Will the war on terror affect us directly? Will an earthquake destroy our homes? What will I do if my health deteriorates? How will I carry on after I lose a loved one? Most of the time, we handle these fears and are able to continue on with our lives and usually over time, the thing that we fear goes away or we are able to work through the problem. But

often the fears can be completely debilitating, preventing us from doing anything about them, until, like the Russian railroad employee, the fear itself leads to our demise.

In our lessons from this morning, we learn that even the great people of the Bible experienced fear, even debilitating fear. In our lesson from Kings, the great prophet Elijah became immobilized by fear. God had sent a great sign allowing Elijah to defeat the prophets of Baal, had ended a long drought at Elijah's behest, and had even provided food and water to Elijah in the wilderness. Still, instead of trusting in God to pull him through, Elijah became paralyzed by fear because Queen Jezebel had promised to kill him for what he had done to her prophets, and he went and hid in a cave.

In our Gospel lesson, the disciples, who had every reason to trust in God's grace because of all of the signs they had seen Jesus perform, still became paralyzed by fear as the great wind threatened to drown them. When Jesus appeared on the water, they were again struck by fear, thinking him to be an apparition signifying their approaching death. And then good old Peter, the Mr. Bumbles of the New Testament said to Jesus, "That's cool; can I try it too." Of course he too became paralyzed by fear as soon as his logical brain replaced from his faithful spirit, telling him that walking on water is not something humans are supposed to do.

Of course, the walking on water incident has been the subject of numerous jokes throughout the millennia. People ask me if I passed the walking on water course in seminary and I respond that no, deacons are not required to walk on water, only priests.

The real point is that the Bible chooses impossible tasks to illustrate what is possible through faith. Walking on water was an impossible task for St. Peter. Facing Jezebel's wrath was an impossible task for Elijah. And crossing the divide on those two skinny poles was an impossible task for me. In fact, I would have much preferred to try walking on water because I know that if all else fails, at least I can swim.

So how did the people in our lessons overcome their fear?

We picture Elijah, holed up in his cave, trembling with fear, when God spoke to him. Sometimes we need to find a place of quiet meditation when we are troubled, a place where we can be alone, clear our minds and listen for God's voice, just as Elijah did. And then when God asked Elijah what was troubling him (as if God didn't know already), Elijah was not afraid to let it all spill out. He told God that he had spent his life trying to get the Israelites to repent and it had all been for naught. His only reward had been that they wanted to take his life away. As with Elijah, God asks us the tough questions because God wants to spill our guts, even if it means airing complaints and expressing anger towards God. Prayer is not only about praising God, giving thanks and asking for healing for Cousin Charlie. It is also about verbalizing our innermost thoughts and fears to God and even venting our anger.

Then we have this beautiful passage where God commanded Elijah to go stand on the mountain and expose himself to the fury of nature. And nature does not disappoint. A

great wind, an earthquake and a tremendous fire pass before Elijah but in each case, the Lord is not in the calamity. At last the Lord appeared to Elijah in the sound of sheer silence. Again, it is in the silence that we are most apt to hear the word of the Lord. After we tell our troubles to the Lord and submit our petitions, then we must let the silence come into our hearts and minds so we can hear the response.

Most of us avoid aloneness. If we are by ourselves, we turn on the radio or television or we read a book. For us, being alone is being in doubtful company. But it is in being alone that we are not alone. It is in being alone that we become aware of God's presence in our lives. The person who has made peace with God and herself, when alone, is in good company.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus, after a hard day of ministering to the crowds, went up to the mountain to pray, to be alone with God. It was there, on the mountaintop, that he was able to see the distress of the disciples out on the sea. Prayer gave Jesus a unique perspective to see things as they really were, just as prayer and meditation affords us the spiritual perspective and space to see things from God's viewpoint. To truly see things, we need to put a little distance between ourselves and our lives.

And what about St. Peter. As long as he focused on the face of Jesus, he did fine but as soon as he allowed himself to look down at the wind and the waves, his heart became flooded with fear. Likewise in Nepal, I learned never to look down. As long as I focused on the objective ahead of me, I was fine but whenever I looked over the precipice or off the side of the high swaying bridge, I lost it.

Loss of faith is bound to happen from time to time. Elijah lost faith, Peter lost faith, and I know I lose faith all the time. Not to worry, God is always there to pick us up when we fall. We just need to ask. Jesus grabbed Peter when he asked and I believe God held me up when I asked. I said a little prayer before I ventured out on those poles and it seems to have worked. Yes, Virginia, our prayers do get answered.