

**“Why Are You Afraid?”**  
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Having grown up without a church home I still remember many of the reasons that unchurched people claim for questioning or doubting religion. Mostly, I think it’s because it all sounds too good to be true. Could there really be a caring presence in the word even given all the suffering we see or experience? Could there really be more to life than what we encounter most of the time? Could it be that God wanted to know us *so much* that God walked as one of us? The Christian responses to these questions are yes, yes, yes!

Of course, there are plenty of questions to ask from inside religion, too. Being religious doesn’t guarantee having answers. Mostly it just steers you to asking a different set of questions. And there are a lot of them. One of the big religious questions is implied by this morning’s reading from the Gospel: is it enough to simply *have faith* in God? It is a question that is asked throughout the Christian Scriptures. Some writings answer yes, faith is enough, and other suggest more is needed for a truly faithful life.

This morning’s story from Mark would seem to support the idea that faith in God is enough. The Apostles and Jesus get in the boat and begin the trek across the Sea of Galilee. Exhausted from his recent stint of preaching on the shore, Jesus curls up for a nap. Then the storm comes. Water begins to fill the boat. The Apostles panic, sure that they will perish, so they wake Jesus up and ask for help. Then, in the blink of an eye the winds are rebuked, the waves are stilled, everything gets dead calm, and Jesus asks two one thousand dollar questions: “Why are you afraid?” and, “Have you *still* no faith?”<sup>1</sup> The Apostles’ minds are blown as they wonder to themselves just who this Jesus person is anyway.

A widespread interpretation of the story is that it is a reminder that Jesus will protect us from the storms in life. It is a sort of dramatic demonstration that when we call on Jesus, he will come along to fix our troubles for us. After all that seems to be what is happening in the story, right?

But there is something about that view that doesn’t sit right with me. Read that way, the story becomes another opportunity for making a declaration about Christ, or God working through him. It becomes yet another moment of praise among many, which leads us to bend the knee and give God the glory. Now, don’t get me wrong, I love God and make a point to spend the majority of my Sundays and other religious days doing just that, as well as praying daily. Many of us do these things, and that’s all to the good. The question for me is where is the grace in

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 4:40 b-c.

that? It is wonderful to have faith in God. I have no doubt that Jesus and God could do anything they wanted to in the world. But where is the grace in Jesus working *another* wonder; in doing what seems to be yet another magic trick for his Apostles?

Jesus sometimes *does* ask his Apostles what they believe about him. But more often than not he is trying to get them to *do* something. When Jesus first meets Simon and Andrew, who are out fishing, he says to them: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they leave their nets and follow him.<sup>2</sup> He didn’t tell the soon-to-be Apostles that they had to *believe anything* about him. There was not a demand that they bend their knees or give him glory. Instead, he called them into action. He put them on the road from being fishers of food to being fishers of souls. Immediately they were drawn into doing God’s work.

Throughout his ministry Jesus continues to put the Apostles to work. He brings them into a new life travelling with him. He teaches them through parables, which he even explains to them when their understanding falters. Most significantly, he sends them out to preach and heal as he does, and has taught them to do.<sup>3</sup> Christ’s is a ministry of action at least as much as of faith.

Action and faith are often powerfully connected in Christian stories. Sometimes in ways we may not expect, or see, at first glance. I see that in our other passage from Second Corinthians. It talks about opening our hearts to one another and to God. “There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return...open wide your hearts also.”<sup>4</sup> At first glance, this may seem to concern love or faith without action. But here is something I learned about the word “affection.” While it has fallen out of common use nowadays, one ancient understanding of affections meant “to do something to, act on.” It wasn’t until some 1,300 years after Second Corinthians was written that the primary understanding of affection had to do with emotions. Hear that part of the passage again, and a little more of it, with this more ancient, and appropriate, understanding:

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our actions, but only in yours. In return...open wide your hearts also.<sup>5</sup>

Understood in this way, love and action—or faith and works—are linked. As we love, so we act; and our actions demonstrate our love. Elsewhere in Scripture we hear that “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”<sup>6</sup> Given this perspective, how do we hear Christ’s two

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 10:1-14, Mark 6:7-13, Luke 9:1-6.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:12-14, edited.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, edited.

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:18.

thousand dollar questions now? “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”<sup>7</sup> What is Jesus *really* asking them? Why are you afraid...Of the water and wind? Of Jesus sleeping through a storm instead of helping those he called to learn with him? Of being abandoned? Afraid of *what*?

“Have you still no faith?” Is this faith in *Jesus*, the same man they left their former lives behind to follow? The very one woke up because they *knew* he could help them? Faith in the God who brought them together with Jesus? Is Christ asking them to have faith in *his* connection with God? Or is he asking them to believe in their own connection to God?

Fear and faith are intimately connected here. As fear abates, faith grows, and vice versa. I think Jesus is asking the Apostles to face a fear that we all have. There is a famous quote about this fear from Marianne Williamson.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our *light*, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are *a child of God*.<sup>8</sup>

Of all Christ’s lessons, this one is the hardest to take: we are *all* children of God. Jesus may be the firstborn of God’s family, but we are called to be sisters and brothers within it. And I think that is what Jesus is nudging the Apostles to embrace.

Why are *you* afraid? Have *you* still no faith? You are all Christ’s Apostles, don’t you remember what that means? Simon Peter, James, John, children, members and friends of the Westhampton Congregational Church—you, too, are children of God. You, too, can calm the storms in your life. You, too, can *act* to bring about God’s realm here and now.

Each of us is called to work with Jesus, and even *as* Jesus to stand up for the oppressed. To do our part to calm the storms of poverty and need. Each of us is called to look out for the widows, and the divorced and the orphans, and to help those who need help the most. All those people whom our culture casts out, we are called to gather in that circle of grace into which we are called as God’s children.

And, sometimes we doubt we can. Sometimes we doubt we can overcome whatever obstacles are between us and spreading grace. And in those times we may need to call on Jesus. But we should never forget that Jesus lives in us, too! It is well within our hands to do God’s work. It is

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 4:40 b-c.

<sup>8</sup> From Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course on Miracles*, also quoted variously by Nelson Mandela and Maya Angelou.

well within our means to grapple with the winds of the Holy Spirit and the waters of Baptism, even when seem to be churned into a dreadful storm. That's what discipleship is: believing that whatever comes, that God's grace is enough to see us through, and acting on that in God's name. We can still the waters. We can calm the winds. We can believe *and* act in God's name, because we are all part of God's family.

It is enough to simply have faith in God? I say no...at least today. We do hear different things from Scripture at different times. It is a plural witness, after all, written by dozen of authors over thousands of years. But today, I hear Jesus calling us to demonstrate our faith through action. And there's the grace for us this morning: we are *invited* to *act* in God's name. To heal and to help people whenever and wherever we can. We are called to be Christ's ambassadors to the world. By opening our hearts fully to God, we prepare room for God to work through us and use us to do God's work. May each of us open ourselves to living fully into these blessings.

Amen.

**Mark 4:35-41**

35On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”

36And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” 39He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” 41And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

**2 Corinthians 6:1-2, 11-13**

1As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2For he says,

‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

11 We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. 12There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. 13In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.