

Proper 14 A August 13, 2017

I Kings 19: 9-18; Psalm 85: 8-13; Romans 10: 5-15; Matthew 14: 22-33

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When Tom and I lived in Tennessee, we, along with a group of friends, did many weekends of white water canoeing in the rivers of North Carolina and north Georgia. One Saturday we decided to take on the Chattahoochee, the river of “Deliverance” fame; we could practically hear the dueling banjos. Exciting, challenging, all was well until Tom’s and my canoe hit a hidden rock, flipped, and hurled us across the rapids into a swirling vortex. My still-today memory is of struggling to surface, but the whirlpool’s power was too great, threshing me, tossing me round and round like a sock in the washing machine. It was terrifying; breathless, I thought of our five children at home with grandparents, and could only cry out, “Lord, save us!” The next moment I saw the brilliant, fluorescent yellow tow line like a beacon in the swirling whirlpool. Clinging to it, friends pulled me to shore, as I gasped, “Tom! He’s still in the vortex!” Quickly, another rope skillfully tossed, pulled Tom to safety. “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.”

Anxiety-to-fear, front and center in today's Gospel from Matthew, is the archenemy that keeps us lodged in the False Self with little room for relationship with God. Egocentric fear says it is up to us, blocking full surrender to God as we create pretense upon pretense that we are masters of our own lives. This fear of submission to the will of God crouches in our hearts, in the corner of our minds; it hollows out our souls. Fear secretly gnaws and eats away at all the spiritual ties that bind us to God, and we reach for false bonds, clinging, but they always break and we sink, helpless and despairing, while powers and principalities rejoice.

Fear, despite our most clever, tried and true defenses, crouches ready to paralyze us: fear of an important decision, insufficient funds, an unfortunate stroke of fate...losing one's job, a debilitating illness, an irresistible vice, fear of public disgrace, of dying...on it goes. That is, until we name the Name of the One who makes the fear inside us recoil, anxiety tremble and puts them to flight. How might we prepare our souls against fear?

Decades ago, my friend, Carol Clark, wife of a prominent bank president, was the only customer shopping in a small boutique, when suddenly a large, burly man burst through the door of Carol's dressing room brandishing a hand gun. Carol, clothed only in her undergarments, a slight woman physically but

a giant in the faith, stood her ground, instantly responded, “In the Name of Jesus Christ, I order you to put away that gun and leave.” By the Grace of God, the want-to-be thief did flee, while Carol and the shop owner burst into tears of relief and gratitude. Fear thwarted. I knew Carol to be formed by her spirituality of “The Word is very near you, on your lips and in your heart”, developed over many years of Bible study, worship and deep prayer, yet her courageous faith ready at imminent peril inspires me to this day.

Is our anxiety more prevalent, more entrenched than we notice or admit?

Does it take refuge in the corner of our minds, chipping away at our faith?

Time and time again self-reliance; self-sufficiency; ego strength can only crash when the winds of life “are against us” as with the disciples on the storm-rocked sea. At the sight of Jesus approaching their boat, walking on the water, their anxiety even became terror: “It’s a ghost!” they cried. Do we also fail to recognize Jesus coming to rescue us in our own frightening circumstances?

Are we deaf and blind to the coming of the Lord? But, then, immediately,

Jesus speaks, “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.” But, as Peter, we

question, don’t we? “Lord, IF, IF, IF, it is you, command me to come to you on the water,” IF: only four other times in Holy Scripture concerning Jesus

does IF surface...Satan in the three wilderness temptations, IF you are the

Son of God, THEN, and finally, the Roman soldier: IF you are the Son of God, then come off the Cross. Perhaps, sadly, tragically, our central organizing principle is a questioning and demanding IF rather than the words of my friend, Carol Clark, “In the Name of Jesus Christ, I order...”

Fear is a funny thing, hidden in its full force, yet powerful enough to refuse complete submission to the living Christ. What are the signs and symptoms? Have you lost heart? The joy of living? Are you bored, rudderless with little or no purpose in life? In a flat-line of mere existence? Suffering an erosion of an earlier faith? Are we like the prophet Elijah asking to die, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors?”

Prayerfully, today, may you and I determine to name the One who overcame fear, nailed it to the Cross, committed it to oblivion, then led it captive forever in the procession of resurrected victory over our conditional surrender to the Lord, sin and death. If we do, it’s as if the heavens shall open and we hear the hallowed words down through the ages: “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.”
Amen.