

Our scripture passages for today, for those listening later online, are 2 Kings 2:1-15, Psalm 114, Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16, Mark 6:45-52

I think that preaching could often be equated to trying to frame the Mona Lisa with a frame from the dollar store. And in our passage from the Gospel of Mark this morning, there are, depending on your translation, 9 words that to me would be like trying to frame the Mona Lisa with a.... well, you get it.

I think the ESV does a beautiful job with the latter half of verse 50 in chapter 6 of Mark, as it reads, ***“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”***

Have you ever been afraid? Just a few weeks ago, before I ever knew I’d be speaking today, I saw on the news a story on fear. I later looked it up online and you know what according to the National Institute of Mental Health, the number one fear is in America? It is the fear of public speaking.

The other top 9 fears they listed are:

2. Death
3. Spiders/insects
4. Darkness
5. Heights
6. Snakes/reptiles

7. Flying
8. Confined spaces/claustrophobia
9. Open spaces

It is clear that there are a lot of fears and so, maybe these verses this morning stood out to me more because of that. ***“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”***

If fear is such an issue for us, than I wanted to know what else Scripture had to say about it, and there were no shortage of verses very similar to this one.

We read in scripture:

Matthew 17:7 ***“But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.””***

Deuteronomy 31:6 ***“Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”***

Isaiah 41:13 ***“For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, “Fear not, I am the one who helps you.””***

Isaiah 43:1-2 ***“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called***

you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

John 16:33 ***“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”***

Human nature hasn't really changed in all of these 1000s of years. It is clear that fear has always been an issue.

And so I wanted to know the context of the disciples' fear in Mark, chapter 6 and I decided to look back again over the scriptures for this morning.

The disciples had just witnessed the feeding of 5,000, and Jesus sends them on by boat to go across the lake to Bethsaida. Jesus sends the crowds home and then he went into the hills to spend time to pray. The disciples, while rowing across the lake were experiencing serious winds and waves. And then we read that about 3 am, Jesus comes toward them, walking on the water.

What I love about this text is how it says, ***“He intended to go past them.”*** Did you hear that? Or in one translation, ***“He meant to pass by them.”*** I love that

picture... and if I was Jesus, and we are all glad I'm not, I'd be thinking that this would be kind of funny.

But the disciples see him, and think he is a ghost and are afraid. Scripture says they were *terrified*, or *cried out in terror*. And that is when Jesus says these amazing words, ***“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”***

I've thought about their fear and I realized a truth about it, a truth that is also true about many of the fears that we experience. It was fear based on what they did not understand. They thought Jesus was a ghost, not something you would want to see, and especially not while in a boat struggling against the winds and waves.

And I thought about what we fear, about what I fear, and I realized that they also have a lot to do with what we don't understand. I really don't understand death. I have hope, I have beliefs, but I have no direct experience.

I studied physics, enjoyed it, but I still don't completely understand flying. You can explain to me all day about lift, but I just can't get my head to understand how a big thing of metal can lift off the ground.

I don't understand why sometimes I hurt those I love. I hate it when I do, and I'm afraid of doing that again. I don't understand why I do it.

The disciples did not understand, and they were afraid. But something I find extra interesting, what they feared, what they did not understand, was God at work. They were in need, and God was at work, and they did not understand. I wonder how many times God is at work in our lives and we are afraid because we do not understand what he is doing. But I find it interesting that Jesus intended to pass them by and I realize it wasn't because he didn't care for them, it was because... well, I believe it was because he knew this was an opportunity to teach them.

Many years ago I heard the quote, and maybe you have too, ***“God is more concerned about our character than our comfort. His goal is not to pamper us physically but to perfect us spiritually.”***

I believe Jesus, in intending to pass them by, was actually creating a situation to teach them a powerful, powerful truth. ***“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”***

Jesus insisted they go in the first place, despite the difficulty he **knew** they'd face.

I wanted to know more about these words of Jesus and so I did a word study for this part of the passage and saw that these two words, **“Take heart,”** can also be translated, have courage, or, be courageous.

But Jesus didn’t just utter these words, he gave them a reason they could take heart, have courage, be courageous... **“it is I.”**

Those three words, **“it is I,”** communicate a wonderful and amazing truth. Jesus, God incarnate, was there; he was with them. That is the reason they could, **“take heart,”** be courageous. They were not only, not alone, but the one who could speak and calm the seas was with them.

Throughout scripture we see examples of people not recognizing what God was doing and being afraid. There is probably not a greater example than the cross. We see the disciples fleeing in fear. Not understanding despite all their time with Jesus, being taught by him. They had their own agendas, their own desires, and so they couldn’t understand, they couldn’t recognize what God was doing.

A little over 4 years ago Alisha and I returned to the States from Ireland. In that time we had no idea what God was doing. We couldn’t recognize it. We talked a lot about it and we believed He was up to something, that He was with us and at work, but all we knew is our lives were being turned upside down.

We googled, because isn't that how everything is done these days, we googled best places to live and Boise kept coming up so we moved here. Let me tell you about not understanding what God is doing. 😊

I did not think specifically about these verses during that time, but I knew the truth, ***"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."***, and that truth carried us through some very difficult times.

As you know, I am new to the lectionary and when I spoke a few weeks ago I shared how I was challenged by the process of looking through the lessons and looking for the connections, or in the case of when I was speaking on giving, looking for something other than a connection.

In these passages I was so taken by these 9 words in Mark that I didn't really give the other passages another thought. But as I was wrapping up my thoughts, I figured I'd look back and I thought I'd see more truths about fear.

I looked again at 2 Kings, chapter 2 and I didn't see anything about fear, but I saw a beautiful picture of God's love, God's power, and God's presence. Just like what we see in Mark.

I looked again at Psalm 114, and once again I didn't see fear, at least not the fear of man. But I saw again, God's power, God's presence, and I saw a picture about how nature obeys and responds to God.

And finally I looked at Ephesians, chapter 4. And I looked again. And I looked again. I didn't see it. I saw the verse that read, ***"Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching."*** I saw the similarity to our chapter in Mark, with them being in the boat tossed by the wind and waves, not understanding what God was doing. But I don't know... I felt like there was more there that connected to the truth of those amazing words, ***"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."*** And then I was reminded of the, "why." Why Jesus could say, ***"take heart"***, be courageous, ***"don't be afraid."*** It is because of those three words, ***"It.. is.. I."*** Jesus could tell us those things because of who he is, and where he is. God incarnate, with us.

And in Ephesians we see the truth that we also see in places like 1 Corinthians, chapter 12. That we, together His church, are called his body with him as the head.

I can live courageously and not be afraid, because just as Jesus was there and could comfort and encourage the disciples by who he is and where he is,

today we have his spirit, and we have his body, the church to encourage, comfort, and reassure us in times of uncertainty and fear. ***“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”***