

To Find What We Had Lost
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Sunday, 7 August 2005
Rev. Paulo Gustavo França
Text: Matthew 14:22-33

“But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’
Matthew 14:27 (NRSV)

Prayer

Most merciful and most just God,
Deeply hidden and yet most nearly present;
Open the ears of our hearts and speak unto our soul today
Through your Holy Word.
In Christ’s name we pray. Amen!

Do not be afraid.”

These words occur almost 100 times in the Scriptures. These are usually the first words out of the mouth of angels when they bring news to the people of God. Abraham, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, the Apostle Paul sitting in prison, the women who went to Jesus’ tomb looking for Christ’s body on Easter and the disciples terrified by the vision of Jesus walking on water all heard these same words. “Do not be afraid.” And this morning, we too listen to them as the Spirit of God speaks to us through the Gospel story.

There is no question that we – humans – are fearful creatures. We are afraid of violence, suffering, an uncertain future, change, illness, loneliness, and, most of all, we are afraid of death. Such fears seem to have been in our bones from birth and, at times, they cast a shadow over our lives – a dark shadow that keeps us from experiencing the beauty of life, the joy of intimate relationships, and the freedom we have when we understand that God has created us to live each day to the fullest and with zest.

Unfortunately, dealing with fear and the anxiety it brings into our lives is an unavoidable reality of human existence. All of us here this morning have been in that place in our lives where our fears were so real and palpable that we felt as if we were completely overwhelmed and paralyzed them. It may have been the loss of somebody close to us, an unexpected diagnosis that exposed the tenuous and fragile nature of life, or the inevitable changes brought about by a divorce or unemployment that triggered that terrifying sense of hopelessness, insecurity and anxiety. That fear that we might end up excluded, alone, rejected or abandoned. Invariably our tendency is to suppress our fears and avoid facing up to them. Too often we resist changes; or we try to be in control; or we remain silent when we would like to speak our heart to our friends and loved ones because we are afraid. Our fears restrain and keep us from looking at the world from a different perspective. So we have to give Peter credit for trying to reach out beyond his own fears to meet Jesus outside the boat, on the wavy waters.

The writer, teacher and activist Parker J. Palmer says in his book, *"The Company of Strangers,"* that **"God persistently challenges conventional truth and regularly upsets the world's way of looking at things. [...] Where the world sees impossibility, God sees potential. Where the world sees comfort, God sees idolatry. Where the world sees insecurity, God sees occasions for faith. Where the world sees death, God proclaims life."**

To see the world through God's eyes, we have to be willing to follow Peter's example and to step outside the boat on to the water; into the unknown.

In my life I have taken many different directions and, slowly, very slowly, I am learning to lay aside my fears to pursue God's plans for me. Every time I embark on the journey of faith, I discover that the apparent "wrong turns" or "detours" that I take always turn out to be priceless opportunities for spiritual, emotional and personal growth. I just have to resist the temptation to give in to my fears so I can move on when things are uncertain or seemingly out of my control. Once I am able to overcome my fears I can see how periods of illness help me to be more compassionate to those who are sick. Periods of happiness show me how to celebrate the joyful events in the lives of others. Periods of doubts make me understand better and respect the questions others may raise regarding their own faith. Periods of turmoil help me to listen more patiently as others try to unravel the difficulties in their own lives. Periods of uncertainties teach me to trust God and to share the presence of Christ in my life with people who are searching for a spiritual home. Had I not embarked on this faith journey and taken the unexpected turns and detours along the way, in spite of my fears, my life would not have been as rich as it is now.

This is why I am grateful for the privilege I have had to do ministry among you. It is a long way from Rio to Cleveland Heights and it was not easy to leave the safety and comfort of my family's home in Brazil to travel across the Americas to serve God in your midst. It is always a great challenge to start your

life all over again in a place so unfamiliar where you are a stranger without any support system to begin with. But I am definitely glad that I put aside my fears and apprehensions to come here. If I had stayed in Rio, I would not have enjoyed the gift of your hospitality and your friendship. Of course, like everything else in real life, my time here at Fairmount Church also had its obstacles and difficulties. What became very clear to me though is that when we are willing to step into the unknown, even when we are overwhelmed with doubts and fears, God remains close to us and, at that very moment, when we think we are going under, God reaches out to us and saves us from drowning in the tempestuous waters of life.

Saint Teresa of Avila reminded the Church of one basic truth and that is, ***“Christ has no body now on earth but yours. No hands but yours. No feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which God's compassion will look upon the world. Yours are the feet with which God will go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which God will bless others now.”***

And I can say without any shadow of doubt that I have experienced the saving hand of God in my life through each one of you. Your friendship and genuine care have taught me to walk on water without sinking into the depths of my own fears, hopelessness and loneliness. And for that I will be forever grateful to Fairmount Church.

My prayer for you as I go away is that God will continue to use this Church to bless many other lives whether clergy or lay people, long time members or newcomers. Always remember your calling to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Do not let your fears keep you from envisioning a wonderful future for this congregation. Carry on with your mission to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ in ways that will help all of us to walk on the troubled waters of our divided world without allowing our fears to isolate or constrain us. Be the voice of Christ in this city encouraging each other not to be afraid. Be God's loving hands helping and serving those who are struggling to stay afloat in the midst of life's complexities and challenges.

I am sure that as the youth group goes on this mission trip to serve the poor and destitute in New York City, they will also find out for themselves how we can move beyond our fears and prejudices to work together to build a better world for all humanity.

So tomorrow I will take another step into the unknown. As I leave Cleveland Heights to search for that place where God is calling me to be and to serve, I am reminded of one of my favorite poems by Hermann Hesse; it is entitled "STAGES." I have read it to some of you and I will leave it with you as a word of encouragement as we seek to reach beyond our fears to serve God and one another.

Stages

As every flower withers and all youth makes place for old age,

So every stage of life blooms,

Blooms every grasp of truth too, and every virtue in its day

And must not last forever.

At every call of life the heart must be prepared for leave-taking and new beginnings,

To give itself with bravery and without morning to other and new relationships.

In every new start dwells a magic force
For guarding us and helping us to live.
Serenely let us move from place to place
And let no sentiments of home detain us.
The Cosmic Spirit seeks not to restrain us
But lifts us stage by stage to wider spaces.
As soon as we make a home of any stage of life
There is danger that we may lose vigor.
Only he who is ready for leave-taking and for travel,
May break away from the paralyzing chains of permanence.
Perhaps, even at the our of our death
We are taken as children to fresh and newer places;
The call of life to us never ceases...
Oh well then, heart, bid farewell and heal!

“Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to
accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory
in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

(Eph. 3:20-21)

Irish Blessing

May the road rise up to meet you
May the wind be always at your back
May the sunshine warm upon your face

The rains fall soft upon your fields

And until we meet again

May God hold you in his hands.

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França