

Year B, 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7
June 20, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

It is a beautiful summer day. (It is the solstice today. The sun’s northward journey ends at 11:31 tonight). It is Father’s Day, another mark of summer. If that makes this a good day for you, blessings; if it is not, God bless you. We celebrated the first federally recognized Juneteenth yesterday, commemorating the final emancipation of the slaves in Galveston in 1865. What was the weekend of the summer solstice - Father’s Day - Juneteenth like for you last year?

One of the primary tasks of the religious life is meaning making; discerning what to make of the goings on in this life. What do things mean? How do we respond? What do we make of how we respond, our instinctual response as opposed to a response based on faith and reason? Meaning making is all about understanding where what we believe (or want to believe) lines up with how we see the world and how we live our lives. God willing, we will consider where those things diverge, and, God willing, do our best to align them.

This is going to take a long time, making meaning of the past year. We had race based disturbances across the country. Whether you call them riots or uprisings, they happened. Police were killed by a mob storming the Capitol intent on overturning our election. There are conspiracy theories manifesting as in party platforms as well as in policy and legislation. Tens of millions have been sickened in this country by COVID-19, nearly 200,000,000 across the globe; and just this week we passed the grim milestone of 600,000 dead. What a year.

What does this all mean? How do we take what we profess to believe, our Christian faith, and apply it to understanding the world and our place in it? We need to do this every day. One of the reasons Jesuits have been so effective in the world is that central to St. Ignatius’ system is a daily examination of the self in relation to God. It is called, cleverly, the Examen. Little daily questions like, “How have I been blessed today?” “How could I have done better today? Been more kind today? More forgiving?” “What do I look forward to tomorrow?” Simple, but profoundly important questions if we care to understand how God works in the world, in our lives.

Being conscious of how we live our lives, just taking the time to review what happened in our day, raises our lives from the dullness of the ongoing progression of time and holds it in the light of our mind's consciousness and of our heart's spirit, and in that, God's light, Christ's Spirit. This is one of the ways we bring our faith to bear, reflecting on what has been, and on how our relationship with God in Christ with the Holy Spirit actually guides our lives (or doesn't). Then, when we find ourselves doing well, if not good, to reenforce it and continue; and where we find ourselves wanting, to amend our lives.

Holy Scripture is one of the great gifts God has given us. It tells the story of our ancestor's relationship with God. It gives us passes on wisdom. It gives a vocabulary to our faith and a narrative arc through which we understand the world. All of this makes for a powerful tool through which we may make meaning of life.

Specifically, the lectionary will give us occasional opportunities to make meaning of the extraordinary times we have lived through, are living in. That is the case today. Today we are invited to ponder forces beyond our control. We all ply our trades in deep water as the psalmist writes. The gospel tells us of the disciples' fear as a storm tossed their boat while Jesus slept at the stern. The reading from Job is God's response to 36 chapters of back and forth between Job and his three friends over why bad things happened to poor Job. (God's answer from the whirlwind is "forget about it, you have no idea"). The selection from 2nd Corinthians is specifically about how to face adversity, powers beyond us, and it is about living in the wake of things that were beyond our control. The readings are pretty cohesive.

There is a lot to pondering life in relation to things out of our control. Sometimes our reaction is frustration, maybe frustration unto anger: your parents (or your kids) take away the car keys; the family member who won't get vaccinated; your government doing things you know to be wrong. Sometimes it is hopelessness: all the treatment options have been exhausted; the drinking... he or she (or you) just won't stop; death seems forever. Sometimes there is relief, "Well, I guess I don't have to make that decision." And sometimes we experience forces beyond our power like the disciples did: with fear and trembling. It is well said in the Psalm "They mounted up to the heavens and fell back to the depths * their hearts melted because of their peril."

My parents got me a little wooden boat for my 50th birthday. (The birthday is next week, I have the boat already). It was designed and built here in Blue Hill, Joe Thompson

finished it and rigged it. It is a little 12' rowing skiff with a cute-as-a-dickens shellback sail rig. We named it "J. Puddleduck" a nod to Beatrix Potter and the Oregon Duck green and yellow hull. First, I'll be careful. I got the sailing merit badge way back when, so I am not completely clueless, and I'm take a class soon, and I'll be careful., And second, since I have been sailing for all of two weeks, I won't regale you with the enthusiasm of a recent convert and fill sermons with seafaring illustrations. That would be annoying.

But we don't need to know anything about what it feels like to be in an open boat foundering on high seas to understand the fear of the disciples. We all know what fear feels like. Be it a dark parking garage, the scary intimate partner, awaiting biopsy results, combat, having a child out in the world... there are lots of things that inspire fear. And this year, we all encountered something fear-inspiring, together. Well, we were very isolated in most ways, but we collectively were experiencing scary forces beyond our control all at the very same time.

A gale must be scary. A swamped boat is scary. (I have only been in a slightly swamped boat, but it was scary). As the disciples asked, "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

Remember quarantining groceries before they came inside? The furtive trips to Tradewinds (how fast can I spend \$200 and get back home)? The lockdowns at Parker Ridge and Island Nursing Home? The news from New York? Going to bed at night, the President's and Dr. Fauci's words, electeds v. career civil servants duked it out in my head.... What was true? How dangerous is this to me, to us, to my parent's? The stores were out of flour and toilet paper. And our shortages, compared to many parts of the country, were mild. It was scary. I was scared. Most of us were.

So how do we make meaning of that time? Some of it could be about the world, what do these things mean; the purpose of government, public trust, the meaning of a global economy that this virus exploited to spread everywhere, fast. Why would God allow room for things like pandemic capable viruses to exist? The meaning of natural evils such as plagues. Today, though, let's start with our own hearts. Because this, overcoming fear, fear of death, or suffering, of things we have no control over... that is the essence of the religious life, it is how our faith truly makes (or can make) our lives better, and makes us better able to serve our neighbor, and in doing so, loving God.

Imagine not that you are on a boat in a storm, you are at your kitchen table (where you have been quarantined for 3 months already). The pandemic is raging. You are scrolling through the news, and it is terrible. You can imagine that it is almost as if waves were breaking over the side of the boat. It is terrifying. You are terrified. (Or just scared, or at least pretty nervous or anxious... you are how you were). And then, all of a sudden, sitting across from you in that straight-backed chair with the caning that could use a tightening up is Jesus. "Hello!" He looks at you and asks, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

What would you have said to Him last June? Why were you scared? Ponder that for a moment. What comes to mind first?

If your answer is "Because it is scary!" true that, Jesus knows that, but then the second half of the question applies, "Have you still no faith?" And it is not because Jesus wasn't quarantining with you in the same way that He was in the same boat with the disciples. At that point in Mark's gospel, they didn't know who Jesus really was. He wasn't, yet, to them the Son of God, he was Jesus bar Joseph (son of Joseph), a woodworker from Nazareth who was charismatic and wise, confrontational and loving, but a miracle worker? The Messiah? No, it was events like this, stilling a storm, that gave an inkling of the great power in this young man.

We have the benefit of hindsight, though. While Jesus isn't physically sitting on a cushion at the stern of the boat, or across from you at your kitchen table, we know now that He is the Christ, the Anointed one of God, and that in the resurrection Jesus Christ transcended death and with every breath we take is with us in all His glory, and even in the wildest of storms, He may be sleeping, He may be weeping for us, or trying to whisper hints in our ears (or shout them through a megaphone), but what He is not going to be is scared. And yet, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

If you want to delve into how your faith carried you through the scary times, (or did not) this is a question to ponder.

There is no wrong answer. Truly. The key is to discern what actually was happening within you and then wondering if you could (or should) have done better, and how.

One response many of us had was prayer. Prayer is a storied method to combat fear. Maybe you spent a lot of time in fighting hole prayers "Oh God don't let something bad

happen to me! I don't want COVID. Keep me/us /all of us healthy." That can bring great comfort, though the results are mixed. (Just ask Job).

Maybe your prayers were more along the lines of "I know you are with me whatever happens." Or practical, "Give me strength and patience to follow these rules, to be disciplined for the sake of everyone else." Or right to the matter, "God I am scared, help me feel less scared." Or "In you I know I have nothing to fear, help me in my fear." I used something along those lines, a lot.

Maybe you said the Lord's Prayer. A lot. I said the Angelus, a lot, when my mind went racing off to dark corners. It didn't just drown out the scary voices, using wrote mantras more or less, it filled my mind with the transcendent reality of God's abundance, which in times of want takes some doing to remember. That really helped me.

Or maybe prayer didn't come into it. Maybe you turned to scripture. Our reading from 2nd Corinthians today is a perfect example of how our faith provides tools to help us. The fledging church in Corinth faced myriad hardships, myriad, and St. Paul gives a list of how to endure! (He makes great lists). He lists off characteristics to embody, things to do, ways to be. They had endured "by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God."

Or maybe you had this story in Mark in mind, and imagined Jesus being with you, unafraid, and through the story were able to be less fearful. How did your faith help you survive this past year.

Or maybe, as you reflect, you will notice that your faith, the practices we learn together here, the doctrines, the prayers, the community, maybe it didn't really help. Maybe, in your fear and languishing, thinking about Jesus never occurred to you. I certainly had moments where I questioned why I wasn't feeling the spirit of Jesus in the midst of a calamity. How my faith wasn't strong enough to accept fully that some things (most things) are out of my control and pandemic time just made that more apparent. Ponder why your faith wasn't helpful. Ponder how could it have been helpful or how you would have liked it to be helpful. If you are wondering that, why your faith didn't help, I'd love to talk with you. Faith can be cultivated.

The thing is, most of us have just survived a very scary event. Now that the scary event is subsiding, we can delve in and learn about how we did. I pray that we don't have anything like COVID-19 for a very long time. But if not a pandemic, then the Cascadia subduction

zone or the San Andreas fault is going to go; wildfires will devastate; seas will rise; cancer will strike; political strife isn't going anywhere soon; we all face death... opportunities for fear abound in this world. You will need to face fear again. How will Jesus set you free? AMEN