

1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49
Psalm 9:9-20
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

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Why Are You Afraid?

I am a big fan of Krista Tippet and her podcast, *On Being*. I recently listened to a conversation she had with Luis Alberto Urrea about borders and belonging. Luis, or Louis, as his mother called him, was born in Tijuana, to a Mexican father and an American mother. Luis spoke of his parent's marriage as fractured from the beginning, of his mother pushing him to be American and his father pulling him to be Mexican. The Mexican-American border ran right through the middle of his home, and his heart, he said. The kitchen was in the United States and the living room was in Mexico.

When Luis was in fourth grade terrible street fights broke out. And while his whole world was Mexican, while every one of his heroes, everyone he respected was Mexican, he was targeted at least in part because he spoke the perfect English his mother demanded of him. It was too dangerous to stay, so the family moved to be with his mom's people in America. A place where Luis was called a wetback, a taco bender, a beaner.

Luis grew up, went to school and is now a poet and a writer and a teacher. "I teach in Chicago" he said, "and I watch students fear each other. I come into a class and African American students are on one side and white students are on the other side. Or there will be two young women in hijab and no one will sit with them, there's an empty arc of seats around them, and I'm always trying to find ways to stop these things because it only takes this much for us to see each other, know each other and love each other and that's what's so dangerous... I always tell the students that laughter is the virus that infects you with humanity, and if you sit with somebody and laugh, not at them, but laugh with them wholeheartedly, how in the world can you get up from that table and say "Uggh. Those people?" You can't. And if you've laughed with them, you're going to cry with them too."

These days, Luis sees the Mexican-American border, and all borders really, as liminal spaces. Borders are places where differences meet, where it's neither one place nor the other, the threshold place where everything is possible. It's a lovely way to look at something that has for so long felt contentious and violent and destructive, a place where people insist there is us, and there is them. And all of that, because we're afraid, afraid of the differences that make the people of the world the most beautiful tapestry imaginable.

When we're afraid, we can be tempted to think the best thing to do is to isolate ourselves, to pull back, to protect ourselves, surround ourselves with people who look like us and think like us. That's what fear does to us. It closes our minds and closes our hearts, and it creates in us a desire to separate, to isolate ourselves from the ones we deem "other." If we make someone "other" enough, it isn't long until we've dehumanized them. And once they've lost their

humanity in our minds and hearts, we can treat them in ways we would never treat the humans in our midst, whether they're the ones we love or the ones we find hard to love. This is the ugly, downward spiral fear can take us on. No wonder Jesus is always saying "Don't be afraid."

"Don't be afraid." Easier said than done, right? But this isn't Polly Anna talking, it's Jesus so we need to really listen and to hear his words. "Don't be afraid." Notice that Jesus doesn't say there's nothing scary out there. He says, "Don't be afraid." There are very scary things in our lives and in the world. And while we do the good work of trying to bring light and life into those scary places, there are going to be times when we're just afraid. What we need to remember, though, is that when we're afraid, we have choices about how to respond.

In difficult times, it can be tempting to want an all-powerful god who will put a stop to all the nonsense going on around us, a mighty god, a god who will strike down all the "bad" people (that would be the people who aren't like us), a god of our own making. It can be tempting to want a supremely powerful god, a ruler who will overpower and eliminate everyone and everything that disagrees with what "we" want, whoever "we" are, a god who will finally DO SOMETHING about all this, whatever "all this" may be.

But a god who would manipulate everyone and everything is not the living, loving God we know. The God who loves us is the God of resurrection, the God who redeems everything. We do not have the puppeteer god or the magic wand god who finds us parking places and makes elections go the way we want them to. We have the God who stays with us no matter what kind of stormy circumstances we find ourselves in. If you've lived long enough, you know there will be storms. Life can be going along just fine, and all of a sudden the sky darkens, the wind changes, the waves begin to whip our little boats around and we find ourselves being tossed into a state of pure panic. And when our lives are turned upside down by a tragic accident, a frightening diagnosis, the onset of a grave illness, the loss of a job, a spouse who has been unfaithful, the child who has gone distant, an aging parent making poor decisions, the death of someone we love, when we find ourselves afraid of the people whose skin is a different color or whose politics are a different color or whose gender isn't clear to us ... when those storms hit and fear takes over, it can be tempting to call God into question.

Don't you care that we are perishing? Don't you care that everything we've always held as certain truth is perishing? Don't you care? But you see, those storms are the stuff of real life, and real life is going to happen to us. It's going to happen to our children and our grandchildren and our parents and our friends too. The truth is, it can be very scary out there. Jesus knew that. When he took the disciples out in the boat, it was to go to the "other side." And going to the "other side" was, in this case, going to the side of the other, the Gerasene's, the people who were not like them. It wasn't just the storm that was scary.

Jesus didn't say "There is nothing to fear but fear itself"¹... that was another guy. Jesus said "Do not be afraid." There is a big difference between those two statements... do you hear it? There are lots of scary things in the world, and we actually can't protect ourselves from some of them no matter how hard we try. No matter how hard we try to keep the scary stuff at bay, the reality is that we are fragile and tender and vulnerable beings. And sometimes terrible, terrible things happen to us or to the people we love. God knows that. It's why Jesus didn't say "there is nothing to fear." Instead he asked the disciples "*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*"

While it's easy to hear those questions as a cause-and-effect statement – you are afraid because you don't have faith – that's not right. Jesus is not saying "If only you'd get over yourselves and muster up your courage, you'd be fine." And he isn't saying "If only you'd pray harder, believe better and turn it all over to me, you'd be fine." I think what Jesus is saying is that if we could simply recognize him for who he really is, we wouldn't actually need to be so afraid. If we could just remember that the God of every ocean and star and butterfly and mountain and sunbeam and child, the God of everything that ever was or is or is to come, the God who knows every single hair on our heads and everyone else's too, the God whose name is Love ... if we could just remember that this is the God who is in the boat with us, maybe we could respond to our fear in faith, trusting in the God who loves us. Maybe then we wouldn't need to be so afraid.

There's another story in Mark's gospel about terrified disciples being out in a raging storm, but this time, Jesus isn't with them in the boat. He saw them from the shore, struggling and straining with their oars, and so he went to them, walking on the water. This time, the disciples were terrified, not just of the storm but of the apparition walking toward them. Jesus didn't ask them about their fear and their faith that time. Instead he said "*Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.*" *Mark 6:50.*

Take heart. It is I. Jesus seems to be telling the disciples, and telling us too, that we don't need to be afraid, simply because Jesus is. And is with us. "Have you still no faith?" doesn't mean "Why aren't you believing well enough?" It means "You can trust me. I am God. I am here. I love you. I will never abandon you. Ever." Those disciples never needed to worry that Jesus didn't care about them. All they needed was to remember that the God who is always faithful, the God whose name is Love was in the boat with them. Wishing the storms away won't save us. When we're sinking in fear and panic and despair, the only thing that will rescue us is Love.

In the midst of the hopelessness and fear we experience, we have each other and we have our faith in the God who redeems everything and turns it all to love. That is the Good News we can all tell. Yes, there will be storms, but when they blow in, we're here to remind one another that we have choices about how we respond. We can choose to live as though the God of Love were the one true thing, or we can choose to live in fear. We can choose to come together in love or to separate and isolate in hate. We can choose to let Christ's love and light shine through us,

¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt at his first inaugural address

comforting one another and reminding each other that we are God's own beloved, or we can turn away. We can say to one another "Do not be afraid," and mean it. Or not. Every one of those choices matters. And one way or another, every one of those choices we make will change the world.

Did you know there are children who play volleyball over the Mexican-American border wall?
Amen.