

Last night I Googled the word “phobias” and discovered that there are now hundreds of phobias that are referenced as serious diseases. Can you identify these? Let’s start with easy ones: Acrophobia (fear of heights), Agoraphobia (fear of open spaces), Arachnophobia (fear of spiders). How about Acousticphobia (fear of noises), Cyclophobia (fear of bicycles), Dutchaphobia (fear of Dutch people), Adolescaphobia (fear of your teenager), Lincolnaphobia (fear of long sermons), Duckaphobia (fear of LaGarret Blount), Yikesaphobia! (fear of the price-tag on Healthcare Reform) and my favorite Phobaphobia (fear of all phobias).

Few are open to admit how much fear influences them. Whether it’s fear of rejection, failure, being alone or dying, fear can have an inordinate and often subterranean influence on our souls. Did fear drive the crowd to make Jesus king? After feeding the 5,000¹, the crowd was determined to make Jesus king and that by force (Jn. 6:15). The situation was volatile and emotions ran high. Try to imagine how easy it would have been for Jesus’ disciples to be caught up in that excitement. Imagine having thousands of people ready to lift you and your leader up on their shoulders and carry you through the towns and villages, proclaiming Jesus the next liberator of Israel. There are few things as seductive as political power. Jesus could see the surge for political revolution coming and He immediately got His disciples out of there. Jesus came first to liberate us from our estrangement with God and the compulsions of sin like pride and selfishness. Until you’re liberated from these things—until Jesus fills this hunger in our souls—, all our revolutions will go awry. Jesus is not ready to liberate people so that they can simply trade places with their oppressors. Before we are ready to lead in any social revolution, Jesus leads in a revolution of the human heart.²

Jesus didn’t want the disciples to get caught up in this movement to make Him their king. Those who wanted to make Jesus King were not interested in following Jesus, AS HE IS. They wanted to claim His name and power but not serve His purposes. They weren’t ready to worship and serve Him as Lord. Fear of political oppression is a legitimate fear and fear of the Roman occupation must have been in play. But Jesus said, in Matthew, *“Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”* So, Jesus snatches His disciples away and He teaches them that **what they fear the most is what they will worship the most** (and rightly so). Therefore, there is only one ultimate fear that will free you from fear and that is the fear of the Lord.³ Godly fear is a glad fear and not one full of

¹One of the temptations we face when following Jesus is to follow a Jesus of our own making rather than to follow Jesus as those who knew Him best have portrayed Him. The same temptation was at work in Jesus’ day. Some wanted Jesus to solve their immediate personal crisis: crises of disease, poverty, and prejudice. Some religious leaders wanted Jesus to validate their traditions even if those traditions misrepresented God. They wanted Jesus to reinforce their biases and prejudices and to maintain the status quo. Some simply saw in Jesus a “Sugar Daddy.” John teaches us in 6:26, that the crowd followed Jesus simply because He could satisfy their hunger. Still others wanted Jesus to liberate them from the Roman occupiers. These saw Jesus as a national liberator. Something like this represented the disciples’ understanding of Jesus. Although Jesus demonstrated that He is able to do all of these things, time after time Jesus lets them know that these things do not represent the trajectory of His life and ministry. John the Baptist’ life with Jesus reveals that Jesus doesn’t promise wealth, health and prosperity to His followers. Jesus doesn’t promise you an undisturbed career path. He promises that His love, grace and presence will be with you through life or death. In this world you will have tribulation but be of good cheer, Jesus has overcome the world.

²How sad it is when one who names Christ gains public power and yet has not been liberated by His grace. You’ve seen it. The star quarterback, the politician, the actor, the Miss America or the evangelist who names Christ, but who has yet come to know even the basics of what it means to be liberated from the sinful compulsions that imprison humanity. Evangelical churches used to sing Rock of Ages, which reads, “Be of sin the double cure, saved from wrath and make me pure.” Biblically, Grace is presented as acquittal *and* transformation. Now, I’m afraid grace is being offered too often only as acquittal. Since this message fits a hedonistic and consumer culture it will be received by many. However, the outcome of this heresy will discredit the faith and make a mockery of the faith. Selah.

³This is paradoxical. “Perfect love drives out fear.” and “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The gospel makes it possible to fear God out of gladness and not anxiety.

anxiety. If you fear the Lord, you can be free from the oppressive tyranny of lesser threats no matter what they are or where they come from.

Let's walk through the episode of Jesus walking on the water asking three questions:

1. How did Jesus lead the disciples into facing their fears?
2. How did they respond?
3. How may we respond today?

First, How did Jesus lead the disciples into facing their fears?

After Jesus fed the 5,000, He immediately made them get into the boat (45). You can feel a sense of urgency and force behind these words. The phrase "made them" suggests that they didn't want to go. After Ava, my granddaughter, sleeps over, when her parents come back to pick her up, she doesn't want to go. She runs and hides in the closet, behind the lazy boy and anywhere she can to avoid going home. They have to make her get into the car. Last Sunday, she had such a good time here at church, that when it came time to go home she ran under the chairs stacked in the back. She didn't want to go. We had to make her get in the car. The disciples were getting caught up in the political excitement; it was affirming and validating. The crowd was excited and ready to begin a revolution. Yet, Jesus forced the disciples or compelled the disciples to get into the boat to get away from that crowd. At times, God calls you and even commands you to do things that you don't want to do. They didn't want to leave. They wanted to stay, taste and enjoy the success of the moment. They were the means through which 5000 people were fed by a miracle! They were heroes and celebrities. And that felt good! But, Jesus would not let them stay. The crowd's revolution was not His revolution. How did Jesus lead them? He led their boat *into* a storm not *away from* a storm. He led them by commanding them to go into a threatening and fearful circumstance. He may do the same for you. The crowd will call them away from Him. The storm will call them close to Him. Now, I love the little blessing in v. 46, "After saying farewell, He went up to the mountain to pray," "Farewell!" He sends them into the storm but He does so with His blessing.

Second, notice that Jesus went and found a place alone to pray for them. He leaves the focus of His popularity and gets alone to pray. By doing so, He reminds us of the priority of prayer.

This week I read about a man named George Adam Smith who was climbing one of the highest peaks in the Swiss Alps (over 15,000 feet). Strong winds blasted the mountain, so they made their ascent on the sheltered side. When they reached the peak and in his excitement, Smith raced up and jumped up onto the summit. In the moment, he forgot about the gale force winds that would be blowing right at him. When he jumped up, the wind almost blew him over the edge. Fortunately his guide saw what was happening and grabbed him by the shoulders, forced him down to the ground and said, "On your knees. You're only safe up here on your knees."

Jesus knew that He and His disciples were only safe from the temptations and the threats of life as He prayed for them. While His disciples were facing a terrible storm, Jesus was praying for them. OK. What do you think Jesus is doing when He calls you into the storm? Beloved, He's praying for you. Can you envision this? What is Jesus doing while you are struggling? He's constantly and without interruption making you the object of His love, grace and faithfulness. He may put you in a place where you have absolutely no sense of His presence. He did so with John the Baptist. But He is always interceding with the Father on your behalf treasuring, prizing you and loving you. Even when you can't see it, Jesus is closer to you than your very breath. Next,

"When it was evening, the boat was in the middle of the sea, and He was alone on the land. Seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them" (6:47).

The "middle of the sea" means that they were about 3 ½ miles out and "the fourth watch" means this took place about 3AM. The disciples had been fighting this storm for about seven or eight hours. No matter

how hard they tried, they couldn't make any progress. In fact, they were going backward and were being blown way off course. This is not what they wanted to do. This is not where they wanted to go. This is not how they wanted to spend that night. I get the impression that perhaps they were more miserable than they were in danger. Why all this trouble? It was all happening because they obeyed Jesus! Imagine what disobedience would have brought them: a warm bed, dry clothes, and a hot meal along with the admiration and praise of those who wanted Jesus to be their next liberator. Instead, they obeyed Jesus and look what happened... misery. They were exhausted, cold, wet, and possibly their lives were at risk. Why? They were obedient. It was obedience that got John the Baptist's head cut off. It was obedience that got Corrie Ten Boom thrown in the concentration camp at Ravensbrook. If you obey Jesus you very well may be headed for a little trouble. Jesus is not a heavenly vending machine or Santa Claus. But once again notice what Jesus does (6:48): "Seeing them straining at the oars, He came to them." Where was Jesus' focus, attention and gaze? His focus was riveted to His disciples. In the storm, our first reaction is often to question, "Why can't God see what is going on here? Is Jesus Blind?" However, notice that He sees you and that He sees His people struggling. Look at Jesus praying. See Him making you the special object of His omniscient, compassionate care and love. See Jesus coming to His disciples. In the storm, while you are struggling and when it seems that you are only going backwards, enter what Jesus does here in your memory banks. **Jesus is praying for you. Jesus is watching you. You are the constant object of His omniscient and omnipotent care and love. He will come to you.**

The next thing Jesus did was truly wondrous. It was calculated to remind the disciples that *He is none other and no less than the presence of God with them.* He came to them walking on the sea. Jesus trampled the waves down the way we used to crush pop cans with our feet when I was a kid. He just stepped on them and they folded flat under the weight of His glory. In the synagogue, the disciples would have heard read Job.9:8, "*God alone stretches out the heaven and He alone tramples down the waves of the sea!*" Or Ps. 77:19 "*Thy way [O LORD] was in the sea and Thy paths in the mighty waters,*" which taught them that only God walks upon the waters. Then, we're told that Jesus "*wished or willed [Gr. qelw] to move past them.*"⁴ (48). What an interesting phrase. Is there any Old Testament use of this phrase? Yes! When Moses was afraid that God wasn't going to go before Israel in the wilderness, He said, "*God if Your presence doesn't go with us then don't send us.*" (Ex.33:15ff) Then Moses asked God to show him His glory. Do you remember what God did? God said,

"I myself will make all my goodness pass by you but you can't see my face and live and it will come about that while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you there with my hand."

Then God put Moses in the cleft of the rock and *passed by* Moses. God let Moses see the suburbs of His glory but not downtown. His glory is too bright, unless dimmed by mercy, to face it directly and live. When Moses was afraid, God's glory passed by.

Also, in 1Kings 19:11, when Elijah was afraid of Jezebel and felt utterly alone, God called him to come out of the cave and stand on that same mountain where Moses stood, however before Elijah came out we are told that the LORD was "passing by." And a great strong wind was tearing the mountain apart, but the Lord was not in the wind nor the earthquake nor the fire. Although these effects were only hiccups for God, they were evidence that God's glory had passed by. By wishing or willing to pass by the disciples, Jesus was identifying Himself with the glory of God that passed by Moses and Elijah. Jesus was showing them that no matter what storm they must pass through, God's presence and glory was with them and they didn't need to be afraid.

⁴"Intended to pass" by is a fair translation. However, it communicates some doubt about whether Jesus indeed did pass in front of them. I read it to mean that Jesus "willed" to pass by and did pass by them and not that He was attempting to deceive them or make the disciples think that He was disinterested in them. I read this as an allusion to the LORD God's glory, which passed by Moses and Elijah in the Hebrew Scriptures.

If all that wasn't enough to communicate that He was the LORD among them, Jesus then said, (v.50), *"Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid."* The phrase, *"It is I"* (Gr. egw eimi) is the name that is exclusively used for the LORD God in the Hebrew Scriptures (LXX). When Moses asked, God "who shall I say has sent me?" God answered, *"Say, EGO EIMI (Gr. egw eimi) has sent you"* (Ex.3:14). "I Am that I Am" means that God is the all-sufficient one. Jesus adopted the exclusive phrase used for God's identity in the Hebrew Scriptures. And then He said to His disciples, "Do not be afraid." Jesus then got into the boat with them. The wind stopped.

How does Jesus lead them to discover that He is worthy of their worship?

1st. He leads them into a fearful situation.

2nd. He prays for them, and He makes them the special object of His power, love and grace.

3rd. He comes to them when the time is right.

4th. He reveals Himself to them as noting less than the radiance of God's glory. And commands them to take courage and not be afraid.

5th. He gets into the boat with them.

6th. He calms the sea.

In His timing, He will do the same for you.

Second, How did they respond to all of this? At first, not well. Thinking that what they were seeing was a ghost, they were afraid. It just didn't enter their minds that Jesus would ever do such a thing. By trampling down the rising waves, He was opening up an entirely new category of His glory and love for them.⁵ Yes, He had calmed the sea before, but that Jesus would come out of nowhere, force the sea waves flat and stand quiet and still on the waves at 3am in the morning, was just beyond their imaginations. They couldn't imagine Jesus would or could do such a thing. For the moment the lesson of the loaves escaped them. So, instead of concluding that God's presence was with them, they attributed what they were seeing to a ghost. Even after Jesus got in the boat, they were shocked because their minds (and therefore their hearts) were still too hard or unable to take it in, even though Jesus was right there in front of them. Mark says that they had not gained any insight from the loaves.

Finally, What lessons of faith can we gain from this.

1. **That which you fear the most is what you will worship.** If we will learn from the lesson of the loaves, that Jesus is the eternal Bread of life and in all moments of life, the Author of every living thing who holds all things together by the power of His word and LORD over every storm of life...If we believe that He is the fullness of God's glory and that He is all of this *for us*, then what can prevail over all that Jesus is for us? Who or what has more power than Jesus that should make us afraid? As Paul said, *"If God is for you who can be against you?"* (Rm.8:31). Look, when you let something threaten you and make you fearful, you are investing that thing with power. It could be a political or other threatening circumstance, an illness, a loss, or any person or any perceived threat. Whatever you invest with enough power to fill you with fear, that is what you are worshipping (at least at that moment). You are attributing to that thing more power, glory and might than you are attributing to Christ. You are fearing that thing more than the fear of the Lord. On the other hand, if you are valuing, prizing, believing and receiving Christ into your life, AS HE IS, and all that He is FOR YOU, then these other powers will have no prevailing power over Jesus in your mind and heart. This is why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Because when you fear the LORD, (acknowledging that God is the most awesome, powerful and glorious of all) and when you receive His grace and love for you, there simply isn't anything else that has the power to do you any ultimate harm. The greatest enemy possible is like a peashooter against a cannon. So, in the storm, remind yourself that you worship God in Christ and let

⁵I'm indebted to Rev. Jack Mitchell for the idea of Jesus and His use of *multiple categories* to communicate His person and purposes.

the perfect love of Christ drive those fears away. In your storms, the glory of God is passing by. Let these lesser fears melt like wax in the presence of God's glory. Moreover, without some serious storms you will miss this grace.

2. **Look at how Christ used His authority and power.** He used it to make His disciples the special objects of His love and grace. He prayed for them, He watched them every moment, He came to them, and He revealed Himself to them as the radiance of God's glory. Then, even when their faith was weak and their hearts were hard, He remained in the boat with them. I've asked, "Why did Mark end the story this way? Why didn't he end it the way Matthew did with the big finish of Peter walking out on the water to see Jesus and the disciples worshipping Jesus?" I think he did so because Peter, who dictated this story to Mark, wanted the reality of the Lord's mercy and grace to hang in the air *as they struggled to believe*. Faith is often a process of two steps forward and, at times, three steps back. For a while, they were just so caught up in the idea of Jesus as a political liberator that they just couldn't see that Jesus came as God among them to give His life for them so that they could have peace with God forever. They had other plans. It takes time for faith in the real Jesus to take hold. Mark is saying, 'Look at the patience of Jesus and His longsuffering. Mark suspends Jesus' mercy upon them as if in mid air. He leaves off the ending, where they worship Jesus, which we read about in Matthew. By doing so he is saying, "Look at His mercy and grace." Also look at His determination to pursue them, teach them, love them, protect them, and save them when they were weak. He does this with you and me as well. Jesus said, "*Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*" God is able and has every right to judge us justly. But, look at Jesus. How did God come among us? He has come to save us, love us, to be merciful to us, to protect us and free us from hell and life separated from His grace. And that mercy and love makes our fear of Him a joyful and glad fear and not a fear that makes us afraid of His just judgment. The fear of the Lord is a glad fear and it is the beginning of wisdom.

3. Finally, you know the rest of the story. It's recorded in Matthew (Mtt.14:33). Before Jesus got into the boat, Peter jumped out of the boat and walked out to Jesus until he saw the wind and sank into the sea. Jesus rescued Peter and Matthew finishes the story by telling us that the disciples "*worshipped Him saying, 'You are certainly God's Son'.*" They came to worship Jesus more than their other fears.⁶ What you fear the most is what you worship the most. They came to fear the LORD more than they feared the storm.

What storm is making you afraid: failure, rejection, losing face, your stuff, status, being alone or loss of health? It is when these things are taken away from us that we discover who our real God is. This is terrifying for us. It can be our greatest fear. However, it drives home the lesson of the loaves. Where do you look for bread? The only way to be free from the tyranny of fear is to worship that which is greater than all your fears. And His name is Jesus. Until we worship, adore Him and have our lives shaped by Christ, we won't be free from fear. Let's worship Jesus and be liberated from our fears.

⁶"And those in the boat worshipped Him" (Mtt.13:33). If Jesus were not claiming the identity of God, He would have never accepted such a thing as worship. His refusal to reject worship is remarkable.