

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, June 26, 2016
Megan Shin
I Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33
“You of Little Faith”

A few years ago, I received a phone call from a friend in the evening. Her voice was shaking and she sounded very anxious. She said “Can you please come to my area. I’m at the Tim Horton’s plaza right by my house.” I asked her what happened, but she just kept on repeating, “Would you please come right now? Please just come, I’ll tell you once you get here.” I knew that something had gone wrong. It took me about 15 minutes to get to where she was and on the way I couldn’t stop asking what may have happened. Did she get into an accident? Did she hit another car? Did someone threaten her? I couldn’t get her shaky and frightened voice off my mind as I drove to where she was.

When I got there and she told me that when she was pulling out of her driveway, she accidentally scratched a car parked on the street very badly. She told me that the spot had been always empty and she didn’t look. And as she pulled back and made a narrow turn, she scratched the car badly. She panicked as she had never scratched someone’s car before, and she just drove away to the nearby plaza. She said she can’t even remember how she got to the plaza. She was in such panic that we stayed in the car for nearly an hour. And she couldn’t drive back home in fear that maybe she’ll get caught. So I drove her home.

As I drove her home, she asked me to see if the car is still there. We found out that the car was actually her neighbors’ because now, it was parked in the drive way. It looked like a brand new car.

Next day, she called me after work and she told me 10 different scenarios of what could happen. “Should I go and tell my neighbor? I feel guilty but I feel like I can’t spend the money to fix her car. I don’t want to go through insurance. What if they report to the police, don’t they have 48 hours? What if there was a witness, what if they find out, what if they come and see my car and see the scratch and find out it was me?” She went on and on about what could happen. She was captured in fear. Fear was making her come up with 100 impossible scenarios of what could happen. Normally, she handles situations like this very well. But it was her very first car accident and she did not know what the right thing to do it. A few hours later, she called me again, and told me that she went to her neighbor and told her what happened last night. Her neighbor did not even notice the scratch until my friend told her! So they talked and everything went well, her neighbor wasn’t so angry although she had just gotten her car a week ago. The car was fixed within a week, and thankfully, her neighbor was very understanding.

Fear is necessary. It’s one of six basic emotions and it is completely necessary for survival. It’s a vital response to physical and emotional danger as it signals threats that we either have to fight with or flee from. But there are times when fear is destructive. It can make us have a tunnel vision, blocking out everything going on around us so that we only focus on the threat. The problem is, when we focus on the threat too much, it starts to look far more serious than the reality.

The example of what happened to my friend is just a small example. She probably doesn't think about it anymore. But the feeling of fear she experienced was real, and it was destructive until she overcame it and made the right decision.

Many of us, if not all of us, have experienced a moment of intense fear. Scratching someone's car, having your business audited, after making a wrong life decision that impacts you and your family financially, when we make a mistake in front of other people perhaps someone in authority. Some people may have phobias, sometimes it's specific people or specific situations that make people feel that way. It doesn't matter how real or serious the threat is, we still experience high level of fear because we lose the ability to rationally discern whether the threat is real or imaginary or whether the threat is small or big. We fear unpredictability, uncertainty. We fear others, how others will think of us. We fear death, we fear failure, and we fear the unknown. It's a common human experience. It's an unavoidable reality that although fear is necessary and beneficial, that fear can be obstructive and even destructive.

Today, we have heard two texts, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. In these texts, Prophet Elijah and Peter both experience fear and doubt, which rings true for so many of our Christian experience, the one of little faith mixed with fear and doubt.

Today's Old Testament text is from 1 Kings Chapter 19. If we start one chapter before, we can understand the bigger picture of Elijah's prophetic ministry and calling at the moment. Chapter 18 is the famous story on how Elijah triumphs over the priests of Baal. God sends Elijah to confront the wicked King Ahab. All the prophets of Baal and Elijah meet at Mount Carmel. They each place a bull on their altar without any fire. Elijah suggest that they call upon the name of their gods, and the god who answers by fire is indeed God. So the prophets call on the name of Baal, and Elijah mocks because there is no fire. Elijah is so confident and bold at this point, that he even pours four jars of water into the offering before he calls on the name of God. And when he does, the fire of God falls and consumes the offering. That day, Elijah seized and killed all 450 priests of Baal.

This is probably the most well-known account of Elijah's ministry. He is so daring, bold, and full of conviction. Yet, in chapter 19, we see a completely different man. Because Elijah killed all the prophets, Queen Jezebel becomes furious and Elijah gets placed on her most-wanted list. Elijah flees in terror. He flees about one hundred miles, and fled farther into the desert. Then he lies down and prays for death saying "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." With an angel's message to eat and drink, he gets up, eats and drinks what was provided from God, and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb, and went into a cave.

This is where today's text is situated. Where is the great prophet who had just faced Ahab and 450 prophets of Baal? Where is the great prophet who was so sure of God's presence and power? The prophet who was the agent of God's power fled in fear and asks God for death. And now he is led to Mount Horeb by God, but he is still in fear and distress, and tells God that he has been very zealous for the LORD yet he is left alone and that his life is in danger. He is insecure and doubtful of his calling and vocation because he is caught in fear of death. Even the great prophet who ascends to heaven by a whirlwind experienced such fear and doubt.

Our New Testament text from today is filled with words that describe the presence of fear. Words such as ‘terrified,’ ‘carried in fear,’ ‘became frightened’ is what describes the fear of the disciples, and unto them, Jesus says “do not be afraid.”

Fear has many masks in this story. First, the disciples are terrified when they see Jesus walking on the sea. They think it’s a ghost and cry out in fear. Today’s readers would think of Jesus as defying the law of gravity, but to the people in the New Testament, water had much more significance. Whether it is the sea with its unfathomable depths, the relentless river in full flood, or the all-consuming deluge, there is something metaphysical about the threat water poses to human life. And throughout the Old Testament, God’s victory was often demonstrated by God’s lordship over water, such is the case in the covenant with Noah, and the parting of the Red Sea.

In biblical thought, only God walks on water and has lordship over the power of chaos, the water. So when the disciples saw a man walking on water, they were terrified. Who is this man with such power and authority and has lordship over water? The disciples have been with Jesus and had experience miracles, but they had not seen Jesus having such lordship that only God has. Jesus calms the disciples by saying “Take Heart, It is I; Do not be afraid,” and Jesus once again, affirms his true identity to the disciples, showing the Jesus is the son of God – the one who has lordship over the creation. And Peter, being a man who loves experiencing things, says “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

And we know the rest of the story. Peter walks on water, yet sees the strong wind coming. The fear of the storm that he knows so well as a fisherman overwhelms his heart and he starts to sink. Yet, with his little faith, he cries out to Jesus. And immediately Jesus catches him, and says ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’

In both stories of Peter and Elijah, we see that it is very difficult to separate faith and doubt. Can you be faithful one day and doubtful the next? Can you have faith and doubt together at the same time?

Perhaps “little faith,” one with faith and doubt and fear mixed together, isn’t something to be so ashamed of. For even Peter who had journeyed with Jesus and experienced all the great miracles, including that of feeding the five thousand just that evening, was filled with doubt. And for even Elijah, who had lived as the agent of God’s work and power had been filled with fear and prayed for death. Little faith, the reality of doubt and fear, is a common Christian experience.

And isn’t it the little faith of Elijah that allowed him to be fed and be strengthened? That allowed him to experience God’s still voice in the cave, a moment of conviction of his ministry and vocation, moment of comfort that Elijah is not alone but that there are seven thousand in Israel who are faithful to God?

And isn’t it the little faith of Peter that allowed Peter and rest of the disciples to witness Jesus’ saving action and the divine presence in Jesus Christ, and led to a confession of faith, “Truly you are the Son of God”?

The lessons of these texts are not 'If Elijah had enough faith, he wouldn't have led and asked for death' or 'If Peter had enough faith, Peter would have walked on water just fine.' How would those messages serve before the realities of our human weaknesses and difficult circumstances where we begin to sink, but to bring about guilt and condemnation for lack of faith?

The message is that God reveals Godself through our faith journey where faith, doubt and fear coexist, that even in moments of doubt and fear, we shall cry out to God with little faith, as Elijah and Peter did, for Jesus rebukes Peter saying "You of little faith, why did you doubt," Yet his hand was holding tight to Peter's.

With little faith, we risk, we venture, we fail, we cry out, and every time, we will experience God reaching out and holding onto us, and we will get to know God in a new way every time. We cry out to God with our little faith. We trust because of our little faith. And it is in doubt and fear that we experience God's grace and revelation.

Blessed are all of us, with little faith.