

Why Are You Afraid?

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St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA
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Why are you afraid? May I speak to the name of the God who created us, walked among us, and will continue to sustain us. Amen.

My calling to ordained ministry happened the summer before I entered high school. I was only 14 years old, and I was attending summer camp at Camp McDowell in Navuoo, Alabama. It was at this beautiful Camp McDowell where I learned what beloved community was. It was where I started to feel like I could be myself amongst my peers. It was a place of deep transformation. It was life-giving. It was awe-inspiring.

And the last night of summer camp, we entered St. Francis of Assisi Chapel, and the priest got up to give a sermon (as we tend to do from time to time). At first, as many fourteen-year-olds do, I wasn't particularly paying close attention to this message. But then, suddenly, this priest became emotive. He was telling the story of Mary Magdalene and how God loved her so much, how Jesus loved her so much, that she couldn't help but follow him wherever he went. She followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, to the table at the Last Supper, to when He was being tortured by the authorities, and all the way to the foot of the cross and eventually, yes, that empty tomb on Easter morning. This priest had tears in his eyes. And at that moment, it was like the rest of the chapel went dark, except for him. And the fire of the Holy Spirit came over me and the words were written on my heart, "This is what you are called to do, to preach my love to my people."

You would expect that at age 14, I was a little nervous to receive a call like this. I wasn't very joyful, in fact. Instead I remember feeling immense fear. I remember feeling fear of possible rejection, of how my Catholic school classmates would receive that kind of news. I remember feeling fear of judgment, of what faculty and staff might think if they would even call this call credible. I was fearful of what my family would think. Would they assume I had gone out of my mind?

The first several times I told this story, I remember shaking with nerves. And y'all, the reality is I'm still scared. I'm still fearful of this call. You might be surprised, but every time I preach, I get really anxious. My husband and my kids can attest. I get nervous. I'm scared. I'm fearful because I'm worried I might stumble over my words. I am fearful that I might say something that triggers someone's trauma accidentally. I'm fearful because I don't keep up with the 24-hour news cycle and I don't know what the new partisan political buzzword is of the week. I feel afraid of judgment, and rejection, and isolation, and not being enough.

Fear is a normal human emotion. But in reality, we're often taught to suppress our fear. We're taught culturally that we should have it all together, that we should present our best self to the world, that fear doesn't happen. And we learn our emotional cues from our community; so if you grew up in a

household that didn't talk about fear, it's going to be really hard to admit you're fearful. If you grew up in a community that never brought up fear, it's going to be really hard to admit that you are fearful.

However, according to Dr. Hilary McBride, who is a psychologist and also the author of *The Wisdom of Your Body*, there are seven core emotions that make up our human existence. For any *Inside Out* Pixar fans, you probably know a few of them. One of these emotions is sadness. We also have anger, disgust, joy, desire, excitement, and yes, fear. And fear, when it runs rampant, fear when it's avoided, fear when it is unchecked, turns into chronic anxiety. Are there any fellow high-functioning anxietyers in this church right now? Fear turns into anxiety when it is unchecked.

I think it's important for us as disciples not to shame ourselves for feeling this way, but to remind ourselves that we follow a God, Jesus the Christ, who was fully human. We follow a God who took on human flesh. We follow a God who was incarnate, who walked amongst us and beside us, who knew the joy and the suffering, the highs and the low, the laughter and the tears, and everything in between.

Our Jesus, therefore, must have known fear. I imagine he was fearful at age 12 when he was separated from his parents, Mary and Joseph, as they were pilgrimaging home from Jerusalem to Nazareth. But I reckon he was probably not fearful of being separated, but more fearful of what Mary was going to say and do to him once she found him in the temple. I imagine Jesus was fearful when he left his home in Nazareth and journeyed throughout Galilee preaching and teaching and wondering, "Will they even follow me? Or are they going to think I'm crazy?" I imagine Jesus was fearful as he made his way to Jerusalem, knowing the end was coming. I imagine he was fearful his last night on this earth, sharing that meal with his friends. I imagine he was fearful as he was being tortured. I imagine he was fearful as he was nailed to that tree.

Friends, fear is a normal human emotion that cannot be avoided. And the reality is those holy people who have come before us, they felt fear, too. Think about our Old Testament friends, the Hebrew Bible. Think about David from today. I imagine being a little shepherd just with a slingshot up against a giant, that he must have been feeling a little bit of fear in that moment. I imagine Daniel, in the midst of the lion's den, must have been fearful in that moment. I imagine Elijah, who the queen of Israel was trying to kill, must have been fearful in that moment. I imagine that Sarah being told that she was going to bear a son in her nineties must have been fearful in that moment. I imagine Hagar, an enslaved woman of Sarah and Abraham's who was sent banished into the desert with her son, Ishmael must have been fearful in that moment.

I imagine the saints who have come before us must have felt fear, y'all. I imagine Perpetua and Felicity, who in the Roman Empire, not long after Jesus, were fed to the lions in the Colosseum must have felt fearful. I imagine that Harriet Tubman, as she took her enslaved siblings out of slavery and into liberation, must have felt fearful. I imagine that Jonathan Daniels, who took a bullet for Ruby Sales during the Civil Rights Movement, must have felt fearful.

And friends, the disciples in today's gospel reading from Mark, they were fearful, too. The storm was raging. The waves were rolling. And they were scared for their very lives. So, they wake up Jesus (who I still cannot understand how He was sleeping through all of that). They wake up Jesus, and He quells the

storm. He calms the waves and the sea. And He responds to them with, "Why are you afraid?" Why are you afraid?

I want to nuance this passage for us quickly, because I don't think Jesus is telling us, "You're not supposed to be afraid." But I think it's easy to get there because in our English translation, it reads after he says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" It says, "And they were filled with great awe." But the Greek for this phrase, *phobos megas*, means, "they were afraid with great fear." They were still afraid. Y'all, the storm was over. The waves weren't raging. It wasn't raining anymore. But they were still afraid. They were still terrified.

So what is Jesus encouraging them? That y'all, we haven't let go of that fear yet. We haven't allowed our nervous systems to re-regulate. We haven't allowed ourselves to find that deep inner peace that comes from God. Instead, the fear is overwhelming us, and the anxiety is more than heightened.

But again, fear is normal, my friends. It's okay. It's human. Even Jesus experienced it. It's okay to lean into that emotion, to not avoid it. Because if we're honest with ourselves, there's a lot we're fearful of in this world. We're fearful of illness. We're fearful of isolation and loneliness. We're fearful of rejection. We're fearful of money problems. We are fearful of losing our jobs. We're fearful of not being able to reconcile with our loved one. We are fearful a lot of the time. We are fearful of our deaths, most of all.

However, the reality is, when we as people of faith follow this Jesus, when we follow our God, we are not reminded that there's nothing to be afraid of. But we are instead reminded, "Do not be afraid." Do we hear the difference in that? It's different to say, "There's nothing to be afraid of" versus to say, "Do not be afraid." Because it reminds us that fear does happen. Fear is human. Fear will occur in our lives. But we, as Christians, are called to be courageous in the midst of the fear. We, as Christians, are called to choose the right, no matter how scared we are. We, as Christians, in the midst of fear are called to remind ourselves who we follow day in and day out--a God who triumphed over the fear of death, a God who triumphs over the fear of enslavement, a God who triumphs over any fear that our life might throw at us.

My friends, so if our God is with us, if Jesus is present in this place, if the Holy One walks amongst us, then why do we need to be afraid? Amen.