

Fourth Sunday After Whitsunday
June 21, 2015 | King's Chapel

Job 38:1-11
Psalm 133
Mark 4:35-41

June of 1966. his name was James Meredith and he embarked on a 220 mile “March Against Fear.” Beginning in Memphis, Tennessee, he intended to walk—step by foot-sore step--to Jackson, Mississippi. The purpose of this March Against Fear was to inspire persons of color to conquer their fears: the fear of registering to vote; the daily fears about living and traveling in their home states. “Nothing can be more enslaving than fear,” Meredith told reporters. “We have got to root this out.”

Unlike the monumental Voting Rights March the year before, this ‘March Against Fear’ consisted of James Meredith and anybody who felt like joining him.

Just fourteen miles into his journey, Meredith was shot. The bullet rendered him unable to continue the march. When they heard the news, other civil rights leaders stepped in. Despite their own mortal fears, they were determined to continue the march in Meredith’s name, they were determined to stare fear head-on.

Overtime people from all over the South and other parts of the country came to participate—young and old, poor and rich, black and white. They marched over 200 miles sleeping on hard grounds, fed by local communities. Often feeling the burn, the sting of bigotry. When they finally reached Jackson, the March Against Fear was 15,000 strong.



I have to admit, I am quite disturbed by this week’s Gospel passage. It is a familiar story. It is a story that has been painted on hundreds of Sunday School classrooms—played out in again and again in our imaginations.

The disciples find themselves in a boat—crossing the sea. Jesus had just appointed his twelve disciples and began preached about the Kingdom of God—of mustard seeds and mercy. The winds pick up, the sea begin to churn and their fragile boat tossed from wave to wave; overcoming those steering, those rowing.

In their fear and confusion, they wake Jesus to save them. And he does. He calms the winds and stills the sea. The disciples were afraid. Afraid that they wouldn’t be able to regain control of their boat. Afraid that their life’s possessions, their goods would be tossed overboard. Afraid that the waves would overtake them and they would die.

The disciples were so overcome, so paralyzed by their fears that the disciples froze. They did nothing.

But then Jesus says something disturbing and haunting this: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

I don’t know about you, but I think I have a great deal of faith—and yet, I am often afraid.

I am afraid of an ever changing world. I am afraid of a collapsing economy. I am afraid of religious extremism. And at times, I am even afraid death—death of a loved one—my own death.

Jesus' words haunt me, challenge me. Even with my faith, I still fear. Have I failed? Is my faith not enough...?



This is where I had paused in my sermon writing last Wednesday morning.

I had hoped to finish my sermon in a clever way, poetic way, saying: the faith we have now, is the faith that will be good enough to conquer our fears and comfort us.

I had planned go on and on about recent poll data exposing the state of religion in America—the decline of the Christian population—and our fears of a changing world and church. This is where I had stopped my writing when Wednesday evening happened.

On Wednesday evening, a gunman—a white gunman, close to my age—walked into a Bible Study being held in one of the United States oldest black churches—and he killed 9 people.

He killed 9 people.

And I couldn't finish my sermon.

The threat of violence is ever present. Oppressed peoples—from those who lived in Jackson in 1960's to those who live in Boston in 2105—know the threat of violence is real—very very real.

Human behavior research has told us that the oppressed—those with their backs against the walls—respond by adopting behavior, ways of life that may protect them. They begin to take caution, and fear becomes a form of life assurance. Fear becomes a way of life.¹



I preach today from a place of great privilege. I am a white male. I come from a middle class, higher educated background. I have health insurance. I am far from oppressed. And yet, perhaps like the disciples in the boat, I am *fearful*. And here's why I am fearful:

I am **fearful** because events like these are becoming to common, normal, expected.

I am **fearful** because not even a sanctuary, a sanctuary is safe for black people in America.

I am **fearful** because I have remained silent, complicit. When racist jokes are told and I say nothing. When I'm asked to join a march, take a stand and I don't. When I look at people through the eyes of fear—and not through the eyes of God—and I separate: me, him; us, them; black, white.

¹ Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston, MA: Beacon, 1949. pg, 1.

I am **fearful** of myself, as a white person, of someone with incredible amount of privilege that can cause so much pain. And I am fearful to admit to myself, to admit to others my role in racism—my benefit from privilege. I am fearful because that honesty, it calls me to step into a vulnerable state—examining my life, admitting when I have been guilty of racism, asking for forgiveness from God, from my brothers and sisters of color, and changing.

I am **fearful**.

Jesus came into a fear-filled world of oppressed and separated peoples.

The Gospel is bookended with the proclamation ‘Do not be afraid’. From the angels of Jesus birth to the guardians of the empty tomb—the message of Jesus is this: *Do not be afraid*—though there is much to be feared—for faith, deep faith in a God mighty than you, in a message stronger than hatred or even death itself, has the power to stare fear head on.

Jesus gave the the oppressed another option for survival, an alternative way to resist powers of evil and oppression. Jesus told people: “The kingdom of heaven is within and that we are children of God.” This great affirmation of Jesus that we are children of God gives us an ‘inner equipment.’²

I think that inner-equipment has great power and ability—for both the oppressed who respond in fear and the oppressor who acts in fear.

When we put on this inner-equipment, when we clothe ourselves in this faith, we come to understand that even though such fearsome things are very real, they do not have the last word. Fear and hatred do not have ultimate power of us, because reigning over this world of fearsome things is a God who is mightier than they. Thank God.³

We find a profound faith in life that nothing can destroy.⁴ It was with just such equipment that James Meredith embarked upon his march ... and it was with the same inner equipment that others took up where he had been forced to end.

That inner equipment, a faith, that when unleashed—has the power, the ability to guide us out of ways of oppression and violence—and into paths of peace. It is a faith that can overcome our own fears and insecurities, our own powers and privilege, and open ourselves to forgiveness and reconciliation.

No easy task.

² Thurman. pg, 53.

³ Bartlett, David Lyon. Feasting on the Word Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 2010. Print.

⁴ Thurman. pg, 56.

But here is the good news: We are not in the boat *alone*. We have each other. We have each other to lean on, to rely on, to keep ourselves accountable. We are not alone. Working together, being together in this can be fear's greatest adversary.⁵

Our journey of discipleship, our March Against Fear, begins here in this place—together with the faith in a God mightier than sword or hatred...and with that as our mission...as our fuel, fear is doomed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Shawn Michael Fiedler

⁵ I am indebted to the work and thoughts of Dean Howard Thurman found in *With Head and Heart*; the Autobiography of Howard Thurman. New York. 1979. "Being in community can be fear and hatreds greatest adversary.