

# TAKE HEART; IT IS I

## Mark 6:45-56

You must make an oral presentation in front of your peers. As you take your place before the group, your heart pounds in your chest, your palms become sweaty, and your knees shake uncontrollably. In short, you are stricken with fear, a strong emotion caused by the threat of danger or something unwelcome happening.

Fear---the body's alarm circuit for fear lies in an almond-shaped mass of nuclei deep in the brain's temporal lobe. The amygdala, from the Greek word for almond, controls autonomic responses associated with fear, arousal, and emotional stimulation and have been linked to neuropsychiatric disorders, such as anxiety disorder and social phobias. Scientists have recently discovered keys to the neural mechanisms behind the brain's response to fear, including its extinction, which may help improve treatments for anxiety disorders and other neuropsychiatric conditions.

But that can lead to the common perception that anxiety and fear are the same, when in fact they are distinctly different emotions. "Fear is a physical response to danger," says Daniel R. Weinberger of the National Institute of Mental Health's Clinical Brain Disorders Branch. "Anxiety is a psychological response to perceived danger." Animals can have fear, which is a response to a threat. But anxiety is human. It comes from what is in our minds even when there is no direct threat.

Jesus said to His disciples, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Mark's Gospel says this happened about the fourth watch of the night. I don't know about you, but if I am up after 3 in the morning, which is the fourth watch, then I don't think very clearly. On top of that the disciples are exhausted from rowing against a head wind. And in a time with no electricity, it is very dark out. So if you see someone walking on water under those circumstances, what else would you conclude, but that it is a ghost? That is fear. But it fueled by something else. We know that traditionally the people of Israel were not seafarers. They lived inland and were afraid of open water. It was one

thing to fish along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, but another thing to cross over the deep parts especially at night. They also saw the depth of water as the place below the earth, place of death, the place of the devil. In the story of Jonah, he is thrown out of a ship into the raging sea and begins to drown. This is how he related that experience: *In my distress I called to the LORD, and He answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and You listened to my cry. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me all Your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, 'I have been banished from Your sight, yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.*

The disciples were faced with fear, the response to danger. But they also will be filled with anxiety. They perceived a spiritual evil, going to hell, that was not present. Instead, they were experiencing Jesus.

There are things we fear and should fear. We should be afraid when we drive too fast and out of control. We should fear when the weather report warns of a tornado. We should fear someone is abusing us. But so much of our fear is not about real danger, but what we perceive. When we are sick, near the end of a marriage, experiencing the death of a loved, alone, confused, tired we have enough to fear in itself. But beyond that are the fears we make up, the fears that keep us up at night, the fears that cut us off from other people, the fears that make it hard for us to see God.

When FDR gave his inaugural address in 1933 the country was gripped by the Great Depression. He spoke the famous words, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." So much of the economic problems were caused simply by the anxiety that made people try to withdrawal all they had from banks and investments. So much of the problems could have been solved if someone had

the power to do away with all the irrational anxieties. But it took World War Two eight years later to end the depression.

What if we had the power to rid all of us of all the irrational fears we have. Think of all the problems that would be solved. Think of how much happier and healthier we would be. But it would also mean that we would be robots, totally without emotion. And we would not have the fear we do need when faced with real danger.

That is why God's solution for the disciples and for us is not to remove fear from our lives, but to come into the midst of our fears. Jesus saw the disciples exhausted trying to fight the wind on the Sea of Galilee. So He went to them on water. Then in the midst of their fear He called to them, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Then He got into the boat and calmed the wind.

That is what Jesus did for us. The greatest fear we have to face, the most real of all fears, is our future in hell. That is what we deserved because in our lives we say to God, "I don't want You." And so we should get our desire and spend eternity apart from God, which is hell. But Jesus came into the middle of that greatest fear and said, "Take heart; it is I." On the cross Jesus suffered hell in our place. On the cross we see Jesus in the center of our greatest threat: "It is I. Do not be afraid."

Jesus has removed our greatest threat, just as He removed the threat from the disciples. We still have our anxieties, our fears of things we imagine, just as the disciples did. That happens because like them we do not recognize God when we should. They saw a ghost. We see a God who we think is not there or is irrelevant. What does God have to do with paying bills, fighting old age, rebellious children, or a failing marriage? We are so distracted by our anxieties as the disciples were exhausted by trying to go against the wind, that we don't see God. Instead we imagine all kinds of things to worry about.

But Jesus comes into our lives as He walked on the water to the disciples. He comes to us in the midst of our fears to say, "Take heart; I is I." That is exactly what happens to us in Holy Communion. One pastor said that in communion Jesus opens up His arms and gives us a great big hug. We see Him

in the midst of all fears saying, "This is My body; this is My blood." In other words, "This is I."

Our amygdalas will continue to make our hearts race and our stomachs churn. There are things we do have to fear. But so many of the things we get anxious about can be overcome if we look at what we really should fear—eternal punishment. Then we can see in the middle of it the cross of Jesus and hear Him say, "Take heart; it is I." And the big fears are all removed. Instead we see Jesus—"It is I."

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