

FEAR, FATE, FAITH & FEATS
Year A – Proper 14 – August 7, 2005
The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today's readings make me think about several things. I guess I would have to call today's sermon "Fear, Fate, Faith & Feats." These four "f's" point us towards a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Christian. What I would like to do is to briefly touch upon each of them. Finally, we will reflect about how they shape our Christian lives now.

Fear, in my observation, is the primary emotional motivating force in our culture today. We are a people who are afraid. Perhaps there is good reason to be so ... just look at what surrounds us. People disappear without reason ... planes crash ... and terrorists attack without warning. Children are harmed too frequently in our society. There is much to make us fearful.

The major problem I see with this is that other people use our fears to manipulate us. The last presidential election shamefully played on our fears with candidates saying they were the ones who could answer our fear problems. Our current administration has used our fears to take us to war. The government has taken away some of our rights in order to deal with the fear of terror. Now we are talking about "profiling" people in our country in an attempt to assuage our fears.

When we let fear take over, our natural response is to become inward. We are more interested in self-protection than in helping others. Fear turns us against each other. It is a dangerous place to be. Look at what fear does in our Scripture readings today. It is fear of answering God's call that drives Jonah away. He tries to escape by boat rather than heeding God. We know that the boat's crew becomes alarmed during a storm. They wonder who has offended the gods. I can just imagine Jonah, sitting in the back, trying to look inconspicuous ... hoping they won't discover his secret. In fear, the crew throws Jonah over the side ... and a great fish swallows him up!

I am struck by Paul's comment about lying in his Letter to the Romans. It amazes me how quickly we resort to lying when we are afraid. We think it will protect us, when in reality it only makes things worse. I am reading Eric Alterman's book, "When Presidents Lie." It chronicles how commonplace it has become for our presidents to lie to us, and the tragic consequences of it ... from FDR's lies about Yalta (that result in the Cold War) to George W. Bush's lies about weapons of mass destruction (that prompted the war in Iraq).

It seems the thought is that the lies will protect us. Or maybe these men thought we couldn't handle the truth. It's no wonder that people have such a low opinion of politicians and government today! The lies lead to more problems, more lies and a vicious cycle that ends up hurting countless people.

Then there is Peter today. He is so ... so us! Peter recognizes Jesus walking on the water. He gets out of the boat and starts walking towards him. But the minute he takes his eyes off Jesus ... the moment he focuses on his fears ... the problems begin. When Peter becomes more concerned with the wind, the waves and the storm ... he is enslaved by his fears.

This is where fate comes into play. When we succumb to our fears, our fate is one of disaster. Just look at the consequences. Our giving into fear leads us into war. Jonah's fear results in his ending up in the belly of a great fish. Paul warns us against lying, because it results in the fate of

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division and anxiety. Peter fears and he sinks. So it is with us. When we let fear rule in our lives, we will suffer terrible fates. History has borne this out over and over ... and still we let fear rule us. Still we let other people play with our fears and thus control our fates!

It is into our world of fear, and the fate that it breeds, that Jesus comes. Over and over God reaches out to us. All that is required of us is faith ... the simple act of trust. Believe and trust is all that is asked of us. I am always amazed that when God comes into our lives, one of the first things that has to be said, whether it is angels or Jesus, ... “Don’t be afraid.” God always seeks to address our fear first. Remember the angels in Scripture (the messengers of God) ... they say “don’t be afraid.” Faith is the antidote to fear. Faith is God’s way of working something new and wonderful.

Remember Jonah? From the belly of the great fish, he prays. It takes faith to pray in such an experience. Maybe it takes a crisis to get us to realize that we need God. God is always there ... but our fear and self-interests often blind us to God’s loving presence. It is faith that takes a prosecutor of the Christians, Saul, and turns him into the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul. It will be Paul’s faith in God’s love, Jesus and the power of the cross that moves him to argue, risk his life and proclaim that God is working something new in the world.

Let’s go back to Peter now. It has to be faith that makes him step out of the boat. To me, the point of the story is not so much the miracle of walking on water ... it’s the faith it takes to get out of the boat. Faith is God’s answer to fear. In the midst of our pain and suffering, when everything is going wrong ... all that is asked of us is to trust God, trust Jesus. It’s not about having enough faith to overcome every problem. It’s about a faith that will see us through whatever difficulty we face. It’s a faith that recalls last week’s reading from Paul, that nothing ... not even death ... can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

This faith empowers us to do great feats. Jonah would go on to be a prophet to the people of Nineveh. The result is a people repent and turn back to God. Paul would take up three missionary journeys and establish the early Church. Without this great feat, the Church as we know it today may not even exist. For Peter, it would be faith that would get him out of the boat. It would be faith that makes he cry out to Jesus to save him. It would be faith that enables Peter to be the head of the early Church. Great things happen when we resist fear, refuse to resign ourselves to fate, and embrace faith!

This past week, a couple of events reminded me of how important faith and feats become. Friday evening, I went to St. Paul’s in Camden to celebrate Fr. Pedro Guzman’s 25th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood. I am proud to know Pedro and call him a friend. Fr. Francisco Pozo was the preacher that night. He spoke about how priests have to speak the truth ... and speak it boldly today. Fr. Pedro grew up in the Dominican Republic. He came to Camden to be vicar of St. Andrew’s in Camden. He is a man of faith who will not let fear rule his life. Fr. Guzman is making a difference in one of the poorest cities of the country. Fr. Pedro’s faith helps him to take the risks, to step out of the boat, and make a difference.

This past Monday, an anniversary took place. It was not widely observed, but it mattered to me. I began my ninth year here at Grace Church. I have someone tell me that it was going to take a

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lot of faith to make another nine years! It was faith that led me here ... and faith that will lead me to help Grace Church move into a new future with new feats. One step towards this is the drafting of a five-year plan to guide us in our vision, mission and ministry. I've been amused at the few people who have expressed great fear over this effort! They say they don't want change ... when change is a sure sign of growth ... and growth is a sign of life and health.

The old fear can quickly raise itself when people resist change. They want things to be the same ... but that can result in death (the very death they think they are avoiding). We are called to great feats! We are called to make a difference not only in our lives but also in the lives of others. If we can stay focused on Jesus, if we can resist the temptation to give into fear and what some people call fate ...if we can embrace faith and trust that God is there ... then we can truly do great things. Our faith will lead us to feats that to a few seem impossible. Jesus is already there ... what's to keep us from doing great things?

The only question that remains for us today is this ... will we step out of the boat?