

Tunnel Ahead

Matthew 14:22-36

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For some people the experience of riding in a car through the mountains on the Pennsylvania Turnpike can be an occasion filled with great inner turmoil. For as one rides along, this sign eventually pops up. TUNNEL AHEAD! The anxiety level increases as the car proceeds into the dark grey burrow that seems to have no end in sight. And it doesn't go away until the car radio becomes audible and the light at the end of the tunnel becomes evident.

The problem of fear is a common human dilemma which touches all of us in one way or another. It can run the gamut from uneasiness about something to a state of total panic. The lack of control or sense of helplessness that often accompanies fear can be physically destructive, as well as psychologically damaging.

Did you realize that we function within the framework of fear a large percentage of the time? Think about it!

1. Isn't it our fear of war that prompts us to seek peace?
2. Isn't it our fear of poverty that makes many of us go to work?
3. Isn't it our fear of failure that forces us to strive for success?
4. Isn't it our fear of ignorance that makes us pursue an education?
5. Isn't it our fear of loneliness that causes us to seek out a friend?
6. And isn't it our fear of being lost that makes us seek out the Christ who is looking for the found?

Author John MacMurray comments about the extent to which fear can affect us. Listen to what he says, "There are two, and I think only two emotional attitudes through which human life can radically be determined. They are love and fear! Love is the positive principle of life, while fear is the death principle in us." To put it another way, there are the

defeatists and the defeaters. The defeatists are those who live in constant fear, like the rich young ruler whom Jesus said needed to be reborn. They often have little zest for true living and tend to share their gloom and doom with others. Whereas the defeaters are love-determined people who have life in them, abundant life, they tend to accept the challenges of life head on and share that enthusiasm for living with others.

Now some might say I hear and understand what you're talking about Don; you're merely speaking of the power of positive thinking; training ones' self to be optimistic rather than pessimistic! Oh if it were only that simple, but our fears in life are real, far too real for a simplistic style of personal mental gymnastics.

When it comes to fear, real fear, we are not self-sufficient. You want proof? Ask a person who is trying to deal with the disease of alcohol or drug abuse. Or the person who has been wiped out by the tragedy of fire. Or the person who has been recently diagnosed as a terminal patient. Personal optimism has its limitations. We need a power outside of ourselves not only to help us cope with our fears, but to conquer them.

The word of God points us in a singular direction \rightarrow to the Christ!

Periodically we see a part, if not a great deal, of ourselves become larger than life as we look at the characters in scripture. This is often the case when we look into the life of the disciple named Peter. In a word Peter was "IMPETUOUS!" the kind of person who acts suddenly without giving a great deal of thought. You'll remember that it was Peter who boldly replied that he would never deny his Lord. It was Peter, too, who in a moment of frenzy and panic cut off a soldier's ear. And it was also Peter as we learned in our scripture lesson that ventured out across the sea toward Jesus.

As we examine Peter's struggle and failure to conquer his fears that day on the sea of Gennesaret, keep this in mind lest we become too harsh towards Peter. Because in spite of Peter's failure to remain faithful, it was Peter and Peter alone who even dared to venture out, while the others clung to the seeming security of the boat.

The incident of Peter's struggle with faith is a short descriptive synopsis of what each and every one of us confronts as we deal with this intangible thing called fear. Perhaps by looking at the incident together we might receive a better understanding of what happens to us as we face our own fears. Then we might gain insight as to know how God speaks to us about our fears and our need to be more confident in our relationship with Him.

The disciples had been tossed to and fro in a storm, and suddenly Jesus appears to the twelve walking across the sea; he tries to reassure them by telling them not to be afraid. Then impetuous Peter, in a kind of daring childlike faith, decides to demonstrate his complete trust in the Christ by asking Jesus to call for him to get out of the boat. It is more than coincidence, I believe, that even in this moment of boldness and rashness on the part of Peter that he had the presence of mind to ask Jesus to invite him. Peter, it seemed, realized that the invitation of faith is God's to offer not man's.

And so Jesus bids Peter to "come." He issues the call for faith, just as he does toward us today. Note that Jesus' invitation to "come" is not a qualified come, but an immediate invitation. He doesn't say, Peter, perhaps you should wait until the wind dies down and the water is calm, or until you're feeling more at ease. He just says "come." In other words bring your fears, too.

If God waited for our fears to subside before issuing the invitation for faith, the kingdom would never be ushered in for our fears are ever with us. Instead he says "come," bring your fears, too, because I can handle them as well.

So Peter went! He got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. Confidently he moved towards the object of his faith -The Living Christ! What a tremendous sense of inner peace and accomplishment he must have felt at that moment. Have you ever had such a moment, not walking on water obviously, but rather a spiritual tug from God that allowed you to follow His pathway regardless of the risk? An assurance of faith that overcame your deepest fears! If you haven't had such an experience, you need to. And if it's

been years since the last time you felt God tugging on the strings of your heart, then perhaps it's time to get out of the boat again. For it is only as we go in God's direction that the blessing of faith becomes evident to us.

Unfortunately like all of us at times, Peter's faith was short lived. For he saw the wind and he was afraid. The trouble was that instead of holding on to his faith, Peter let go of it. Rather than keeping his focus on the Christ he let everything around him absorb his attention and his relationship with Christ became interrupted.

In the days of the sailing vessels, when a new hand climbed the narrow rope ladder to the crow's nest the old hands would cry, "Look up! Look up!" For if the lad looked down he might become dizzy and fall. That's what Peter needed to do - to look up at the Christ rather than on all that was happening around him. Faith is strong, even stronger than our fears when our focus is on the Christ.

Fortunately for Peter, Jesus did not allow Peter's lack of faith to do him in. Instead he reached out his hand and brought him to safety once again. And in that act of love and compassion by the Christ two things were accomplished. For not only had Peter been granted a physical deliverance from the raging storm, but more important than that was the spiritual restoration of his faith. For Peter, along with the others, was brought back to a point of focus, and an attitude of worship towards Jesus the Son of God, the Lord and Giver of Life.

All of us, if we were candid, would admit that we have been in Peter's position. In fact if we really think about it we might discover that we have been there more than once. And that we are liable to be there again. For faith is a process! But it is a process of growth in which we are to become more like Christ each and every day, ever striving for His light at the end of the tunnel, not stopping in the middle because of our fear.

And that is what makes Christianity and Christians unique. It is what makes the gospel come alive; for all religions promise liberation from the power of fear. But unlike many religions, as Christians we are encouraged to meet our fears head on. The Gospel summons

frightened people to embrace what they fear most, fear itself, and it says in doing so they will find the gateway to life. When Jesus says, “In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” He is not saying, “Relax, faith will exempt you from suffering, or problems or even death.” Instead he is saying that all these things do happen to each of us eventually and inevitably. But they don’t have to be feared! For if we are in Christ, we don’t face them alone. Jesus’ words are an invitation to trust, not that God will save us from the problems of life, but from the fear of them.

The gospel is more than some magic formula that says believe and your troubles will leave. Rather it is Jesus saying, “I know you have fears, in fact I’ve been there before you.” But if you’ll learn to trust me as we struggle through them together then you will receive the blessing and new doors will open for you.”

You have fears! We all do! Maybe it’s the fear of being locked into a job that you don’t like. Maybe you’re afraid that you won’t get into the college of your choice. Maybe you’re afraid that if you confront your friend about what is really bugging you, he or she will leave. Maybe you’re afraid that if you confront your friend about what is really bugging you that he or she will leave. Maybe you’re afraid that you never have a meaningful relationship with another person.

Peter had fears, too. But did Jesus desert him? No! And he doesn’t want that for us either. He merely wants us to keep the focus of our faith on him not on everyone or everything else, and thereby grow in him. For even impetuous Peter did not remain that way forever. For eventually there came a time of confidence in his life when his fears were outweighed by his faith.

The following article speaks for itself.

“You Are My Son”

“I had been in the hospital room for several days, and yet I was still frightened. A seminary student should feel so insecure. Was it that I had polio, or was it merely being committed to a

contagious-disease hospital that gave me this fear? The big day finally came when I was to be removed from the isolation classification, and several relatives arrived at the doorway of my room. I had been in isolation for two weeks. They lingered at the door and looked in without entering. A wall of rejection seemed to separate the fearful, dear people at the door and me. Who could blame them? I wouldn't feel too comfortable with me either if I had been they. I had been out of touch with the living. Disappointment and loneliness uncontrollably overwhelmed me. Dad broke through the moat of isolation by walking into the room. He sat on the edge of my bed and warmly shook my hand. Through his touch he communicated to his son, 'You are my son, and nothing can cut me off from loving you at this moment.' The touch of his hand made me realize the warmth of his gift and the huge cost of fear he must have paid to give it." (Dennis C. Benson)

You have a tunnel ahead? Look up, let go, let God carry those fears also.