

Pentecost Three - Proper 7B
6/21/09 - St. David's

On this date a few years ago, a female archaeologist climbed to the top of a geological formation south and east of here called Fajada Butte. She had been up there on numerous occasions before, because it was a fertile archaeological site. But on this day, she made an amazing discovery. While photographing some pictographs, she noticed that a particular spiral design carved into the rock was being pierced directly through the center by a single ray of sun. At first, she thought, like any of us might, that this was just serendipitous happenstance. But later she remembered what day it was. Today. The summer solstice.

She went back to the site and saw that the rocks in front of the spiral were not just naturally there, but had been carefully placed by the ancient people she had been studying. The spiral in front of her was part of an elaborate astronomical clock, constructed by the people of Center Place, (what we now call Chaco Canyon), so that they knew the exact time of year. Today, the sun dagger runs through the exact center of the pictograph. On December 21, the winter solstice, the archaeologist returned to the site to find two rays of sun on the pictograph, each touching the ends of the spiral.

There are many such sites around the world, including Stonehenge, pictured right here. My guess is that most of us got up this morning and remembered that it was Sunday. Some of us might have also remembered that it is Father's Day. But we probably gave little thought to the fact that this is the summer solstice. The exact opposite would have been true for our ancestors. They went to great lengths to

manufacture structures so that they would be constantly aware of the position of the sun, stars and moon.

It is impossible to know for sure what motivated the ancient ones to be so meticulous about marking the solstices. But if they were anything like us, my guess is that they were initially impelled by fear. Watching the amount of light each day lessen starting tomorrow and continuing all the way up to the winter solstice, must have been a frightening proposition. Having a way to observe this trend and know for sure that the light had stopped decreasing, would have been the best way to dispel their fears that the darkness would overwhelm them. This is why when it became clear that the sun was not going away for good, some ancient cultures celebrated Sol Invictus, the feast of the Unconquered Sun. We continue to celebrate on that day all the way up to the present. We've just changed the name of the holiday. It is now called Christmas, or the feast of the Unconquered Son...s.o.n.

Just as fear was apparently a prime motivating factor in the life of the ancient ones, it is also the fundamental emotion expressed by so many in today's readings. Last week, we talked about our God's continuous siding with the underdogs and today we get the most famous underdog story of all time. Little David talks a good game, but he obviously must have been shaking in his sandals as he faced the giant Goliath. Then in today's Gospel, we hear the story of the disciples being overwhelmed with fear as they face a perfect storm out on the unpredictable Sea of Galilee.

While fear can often provide us with a motivation factor stronger than any other, like it did for the ancient ones, it can just as easily have the opposite effect. As we

learn from the disciples in today's Gospel, fear can also be the most debilitating force in our lives. It can produce in us outright panic and a kind of paralysis that prevents us from doing anything in the face of it. Who among us has not faced this level of fear sometime in our lives, being so afraid that we felt like we could not respond, that we could not even move?

These are the questions that immediately surface for me this morning as we search for meaning in our sacred text. What causes this level of fear for each of us and what, if anything, can we do to use our fear as a motivator rather than allow it to overwhelm and paralyze us?

At first listen, it appears that this is Mark's purpose in writing today's Gospel. Fear is obviously the theme and the metaphors Mark uses to make his point are so transparent that we hardly need to point them out. Fear comes, the story tells us, from a justifiable source, represented by a storm on the sea. From the beginning of the Bible, the sea is THE place of danger and death. In fact, the sea symbolizes chaos. In Genesis, when the earth was a formless void, God splits the sea to break up the primordial chaos and bring order and calmness to creation. Psalm 74 - "You God stirred up the Sea by your might, you smashed the heads of the dragons in the waters...You SPLIT OPEN the springs and torrents; you brought dry land out of primeval waters." Psalm 89, "You God rule over the surging of the Sea you STILL the swelling of its waves." Isaiah 51 - "Was it not you God who dried up the Sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea into a way for the redeemed to pass over?" That passage of course refers to the most important event in Judaism,

the Israelites escape from Pharaoh when God delivers them by splitting the sea and producing dry land for them to walk beyond the danger.

The symbol of the Sea throughout the text is as a force of chaos, the part of the earth that is out of control. The Israelites are constantly asking for deliverance from the thing they cannot manage, the dangerous Sea. In Psalm 18, “the waves of death surged round about me, the destroying floods overwhelmed me...but God drew me out of the deep waters.” And in Psalm 69, “save me O God, for the waters threaten my life...the flood overwhelms me. Rescue me, so I may not sink.” And we all know the story of Jonah, another need to be rescued from the raging sea when a guy falls asleep on the boat.

Even for us today, the sea continues to be the central repository on earth for mysterious and unknown dangers. I will never forget the first time my family had the opportunity to go to Cape Hatteras in North Carolina on a camping vacation at the beach. My mom, a city girl with little experience of the ocean, came running in one day after swimming in the surf, pointing back behind her and exclaiming in her loudest voice, “There are living things in there!” We later determined that what she had felt getting cozy with her was a school of stingrays. Perhaps the most terrifying tales in all of modern classic literature are the stories of sea adventures gone awry. Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, Junger’s *The Perfect Storm*, and my mom’s favorite of all time, Peter Benchley’s *Jaws*.

A storm at sea then, is a metaphor for all the things in life we cannot control and the chaos that exists in our world. It produces fear with good reason. It is one of the

most dangerous things in our lives, both metaphorically and literally. What is even more fearful, the Gospel goes on to tell us, is that often in our lives, God seems to be asleep when these awful powers are overwhelming us. Where are you God when we most need you? Are you even awake? The Gospel's answer to my question about what we need to do with this fear also seems to be simple enough. Have faith. God is the one in control, not us. If we trust in God, all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

Except, but...for this. As we finish the Gospel, the disciples are not well. They are not full of peace and serenity after Jesus calms the storm. They are, in fact, still scared out of their wits. We know this because Jesus asks them, "why are you still afraid?" The NRSV interprets verse 41 "And they were filled with great awe. But one translation is much more literal. After seeing what Christ did after they wake him up, the disciples it says, began to "fear with a great fear."

What this suggests to me is that our simple interpretation of the Gospel, "have faith, and God will take away your fears and bring you peace", cannot be wholly accurate. It certainly does not take away the disciples fear one bit. Still, faith does seem to be a key here. After all, this is Jesus's next question to the disciples. "Have you still no faith?" Faith apparently is the answer but the question seems to be, have faith in what? In God solving all of our problems? Obviously, this cannot be what Mark has in mind, because Jesus does seem to solve all the disciples problems and they are still scared out of their wits.

Most of us have been taught since we were children that faith is all about belief

in God and belief in what God can do for us. That, of course, is true, but today's Gospel suggests that this cannot be the end of the story. In fact, the central point of the sea tale suggests that the opposite of faith is not unbelief, as we have all been told for so many years. The opposite of faith for Mark is fear. Though the disciples obviously believe after what just happened, their fear remains, meaning that they still have no faith. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Jesus. He is so calm in the midst of the chaos and turmoil around him, that he has fallen asleep. That serenity, Mark is saying to us, is a sign of true faith.

We find a similar tranquility going on in our first reading as David talks Saul into letting him battle Goliath. David describes to Saul his experiences fighting off lions and bears when protecting the sheep. How was he able to do that? Because David understood that Yahweh was present with him during this encounter. David has an innate sense that God is always with him, even as he takes on the Philistine giant.

Notice the difference. Faith for Jesus and for David means a realization that God is with them, despite the evil and chaos that surrounds them. What that does is give them the serenity and the strength to face head on the danger confronting them. But for the disciples, faith means believing that God is going to step in and make the danger go away. Faith for them means turning it all over to God and letting God solve the problem. Now remember, the disciples are seafarers. They have lived their lives facing the precocious nature of the Sea of Galilee. But despite the skills they have acquired over a lifetime of battling the sea, they suddenly abdicate their responsibility and turn it all over to Jesus to fix it all. They become dependent on Jesus and by doing

so they give up on themselves. What they do is lose faith, not in God, but in themselves, when they turn it all over to Jesus.

This is an incredibly important lesson that so many have skipped over for millennia. Faith is not just about belief in God. It is also about believing in ourselves. Turning it over to God does not mean that we sit in the boat and wait for God to save us. That is turning God into a co-dependent. Yes, faith in God does bring us calmness and serenity in the face of every scary thing in our life. But it does so because it allows us to be the best we can be, because we know that God is with us, no matter what happens. God does not do it for us, but knowing God is there makes all the difference.

When we hear today's Gospel as a magic act, proving to us that Jesus is God, it will not be difficult to have faith in Christ. But it may be very difficult to have faith in ourselves. And when we lose faith in ourselves, we create fear in our lives and become cowards. It's not just that we believe in Jesus. It's that Jesus believes in us. That is what gives us tranquility and the ability to deal with all the fears of our life. That is what gives us the courage to defeat our Goliaths.

Whether we are speaking of the ancient ones, David, the disciples, or us, fear remains a constant in all of our lives. But if there is one recurring message throughout our sacred text from God to us, it is God's desire that we not live in fear. Whether it is Mary facing the fear of a pregnancy that would allow others to stone her, or the shepherds in the fields scared to death about what is astronomically happening around them on the night of Jesus's birth, or the women who discover an empty tomb, an angel comes and delivers the same message. "Do not be afraid." Christianity is framed with

this message from our God.

How can God continue to suggest such a thing in the world of chaos and destruction that surrounds us? Because God is here and God believes in us. Because God is with us no matter what happens around us and to us. By having faith in this presence, we can have faith in ourselves and through that dual faith we can sleep as peacefully as Jesus and battle as gallantly as David, never again being paralyzed by fear. "Do not be afraid beloved. God is with you." Amen.