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Introduction

The deep

The sea has a capacity for sudden change, and can unleash powerful and uncontrollable forces. So the primordial 'waters of the deep' in Genesis represent 'chaos' – an unruly, negative force, destructive of all that is positive and life-giving. God's spirit hovers over the waters and pushes back to chaos to make space for creation. In the everyday work of Galilean fishermen the risk of 'the deep' was a constant threat. This story depicts the response of the fishermen to this threat in the presence of Jesus.

Questions in preparation to read the text

Remember a time when you were fearful? Spend a moment recounting how it felt. How did you respond? What did you feel you had to do in response to this threat? Was there a sense of God's presence or the presence of Jesus in that experience? If so, what difference did that make, if any?

Looking back now, what would Jesus say to you in that situation, and what would invite you to do?

Text

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Comment

Presence or Absence.

The disciples were sent out in their boat to the other side of the lake. On the voyage they are exposed to the threat of the deep. Jesus is alone praying, on the mountain (the place where God is present and known). Jesus seems to be absent from the disciples' crisis for a long time, (from evening to the early morning). Jesus comes walking on the water. This image recalls references in the Old Testament when the Lord overcomes the waves of death and controls the water, and comes walking on the water (Psalm 77.19). The disciples are consumed by fear. Even Jesus' approach is interpreted by their fear as threatening ghost. The disciples cry out. To whom do they cry? All they see is a ghost. It's a desperate cry of sheer panic.

Jesus' invitation

The rest of the story describes how Jesus leads Peter and the disciples out of their fearful despair.

Jesus speaks reassuringly, 'It is I! Don't be afraid'. But knowing the identity of the ghost was not the main problem, it was the waves and the threat of death by drowning.

Peter responds to Jesus asking him to Order it for him to walk on the water like Jesus. He wishes to be able to put the forces of destruction and death under his feet as Jesus clearly was doing. Jesus invites Peter to do precisely that and says 'Come'. So on impulse, Peter cast fear aside, got out of the boat and came towards Jesus. But after that rush to the head the 'reality' of the threat of the 'strong wind' grasps him once more, and fear tightens its grip and Peter begins to be engulfed by the dark forces of the deep. Peter, again on impulse, cries out, 'Lord save me!' and Jesus stretches out his hand to him. But there is a rebuke in Jesus' comment, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' Is Jesus saying that this panic, this blindness, this fear of death was unnecessary. By walking on the water, Jesus demonstrated that the powers of the deep were not ultimate. The walk of faith knows that the powers of chaos and death have been defeated. We are invited to walk in freedom, even on 'the waters'.

This passage addresses our fear. And fear is fixated on loss. The consequences of fear distort our vision, so that ghosts appear everywhere. Conflict is fuelled by fear so that the content of a disagreement becomes submerged beneath the desire to win at all costs. Human relationship is distorted from hospitality to hostility; through fear.

We have nothing to fear but fear itself. (Franklin D. Roosevelt)

In this passage fear is linked to doubt – (double-mindedness, uncertainty, distraction). Which raises the question for us, what is the 'faithful' response to conflict. How do faith and fear relate to one another? What resources could a spirituality of conflict offer us when we face threat and are tempted to fear.

Response

Observe from today's news a conflict that is fuelled by fear. What possibilities would emerge in that conflict if the element of fear could be assuaged? What would be an act of courage in this context? What difference could it make

How do you deal with your fear when faced with conflict? What helps? What doesn't help?

Double-mindedness? What is that like? What is the alternative and how do you get there?

Prayer

Compassionate God, you know our weakness.
Our uncertainty can sink us.
Our fear of loss distorts what we see.
Be present, Calm our storm
that we may recognise the light of your love
in the darkest of places.
We pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen.