

## **FROM FEAR TO FAITH**

**A sermon by Thomas R. Henry  
(including retirement statement and sermon texts at end of sermon)  
June 7, 2009**

**Texts: Isaiah 6: 1-8 / Matthew 14:22-33**

It is an impartial disease, striking both the great and the small. The symptoms are many:: weak knees, pounding heart, chattering teeth, dry mouth, memory failure. It is called stage fright.

Carol Channing was repulsed by food for three days before the opening of “Hello Dolly.” Helen Hayes once went deaf during a performance and could not hear the other actors. Or, most distressing of all, the applause! And Tom Henry preached his first sermon at St. Pauls Church, pausing only twice to breathe. Rock stars and rappers have had meltdowns, and even politicians have been frozen by fear. Stage fright. Actually, the most common fear according to analysts.

That fact prompted comedian Jerry Seinfeld to observe that since stage fright is the most common fear, and death is the second-most common, then someone attending a funeral should feel less pity for the person in the casket, and more pity for the person giving the eulogy.

Many biblical stories and events seem to have a stage-setting quality about them, with God and humans in a life drama. And some kind of fear is often present. Moses had stage fright as he stood before the burning bush. He pleaded with God not to make him a leader. He stuttered or something. Jeremiah thought he was too young for the role of prophet that God had thrust upon him. And, as we heard in the biblical reading for today, Isaiah was more than a bit overwhelmed with anxiety in the temple when God appeared in a dream-like vision. Of course, in that instance, since God was surrounded by creatures with wings, that would be enough, in and of itself, to terrify me!

Stage fright is only one kind of fear, and it can often be managed. All of those biblical characters did it. And most performers would not really want to be entirely rid of it because it helps to keep them keenly aware of the importance of what they are doing. It is a sign to them that their work matters greatly.

There is something to be learned from this as we deal with life, with change, with anxiety and fear. Fear is most often present at times when we are in situations that matter greatly. In fact, we may not want to be entirely free from fear, even though we think that we would. But there are those fears that, unlike controlled stage fright, do not keep us on our toes, but paralyze us. The fears that are insidious. The ones that gnaw away at us.

In Christianity’s earlier years, the believer’s greatest fear was the fear of burning in hell in the afterlife. Now, according to polls, the majority of Americans believe in heaven, but not in hell. (That is so very American of us.) We are much more afraid of the hells that are created right here

on earth. And our fears of hell on earth are nurtured daily by government and media; by talk show hosts and by that most fearful of phrases: “latest studies show.”

There are some who believe that fear is the most self-centered of all emotions and can lead to the most horrible of human actions. If that is true, why, then, would the Bible say we should fear God, or that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom? Well, there are actually several words that our English Bibles translate as that one word “fear.” These include terror, dread, distress, but also awe and reverence. Holy terror, if you will. One reason for compressing all of these meanings into one word, fear, is that terror and reverence sometimes need to be held together. Such was the case with Isaiah, when he came face-to-face with those six-winged creatures in the midst of a smoky vision in the temple. There was terror and reverence for Isaiah as he heard the voice of God calling him to be a prophet, to speak for God. In the end, all he could say was: “Here am I. Send me.” What he probably wanted to say was: “I hope that this is a bad dream and I will soon wake up.”

How, then, are we to understand fear, as good or bad, or both? The story from Matthew, of Jesus, on the night on which he walked on water, brings into focus the contrasts of fear. Fear as dread and distress and fear as reverence and awe.

Jesus had sent his disciples out in a small boat on a rather large lake. In the middle of the night, a storm came up and rocked the boat. And the disciples were afraid they would die. That self-centered emotion, fear, terror, came right to the fore. We have no record of their conversation in that boat. But I could guess that at some point they blamed Jesus for sending them out there. And for leaving them all alone. They were cowering in fear. Feeding each others fears. If Jesus hadn't come walking on the water, who knows, they might have started throwing one another out of the boat in order to try to save themselves. Fear can do that. It can bring out the worst in people. It can bring us to war. But it can also bring us to peace.

Jesus did come to them, walking on the water, and at that point the fear of the storm diminished. It really diminished by comparison to what they were seeing. A ghost? An apparition? Lit up by lightening flashes and coming to them amid the roar of the thunder and the crash of the waves. In seconds, those disciples went from one fear to another. There was fear in being left alone to their own devices in the middle of a storm, and there was fear in the manner in which their rescuer was coming to them. Like the disciples, we don't always like the way our rescuers come to us. We don't always like God's saving ways.

Jesus said to those terrified disciples, “Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid.” Yeh, right! And yet, with those few words, he changed their focus, from terror to awe and reverence. He changed their focus from the storm to his presence, and his presence was so reassuring that one of the disciples, Peter, said, “Hey, Jesus, let me come out there on the water with you.” And Jesus reached out his hand and said, “Come on.”

Now, try to imagine the scene. Don't get detoured into skepticism with questions about whether or not people can walk on the water. Those questions are not important. What is important is that a storm was raging, the water was turbulent, the wind was blowing with great velocity. And Jesus had just changed their focus of attention from the storm to his presence with them.

Every time I read this story, I get a feeling very much like being able to take a deep breath in the midst of a panic attack. (Or perhaps in the midst of a sermon.) In reading this story, the keyword for us is focus. Focus can make the difference between life and death, between fear that is terror and fear that is a necessary part of faith.

Peter on the water is the everlasting example of the power of focus. In the Gospels, Peter is always portrayed as the impetuous disciple. The one who often leaped before he looked. Nevertheless, it is Peter we remember from this story. Those other disciples have just become the men in the boat. It is Peter who went from fear to faith; from fear for his life to the fear that is the beginning of wisdom. He got out of the boat; he got out there on the water. His attention was on Jesus. His focus was on the presence of God with him, and he walked on water. He did the impossible.

In ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, the word “impossible” was pictured as a person walking on water. Peter did the impossible. He walked on water. Focused on the presence of God with him, he walked into the storm. But such focus is hard to retain in the midst of storms. In the midst of storms that are terrifying. But also in the midst of storms that are beautiful and spectacular; diversions that attract our attention away from what we need to attend to. It was hard for Peter to retain focus. Realizing what he was doing, Peter took his eyes off Jesus, looked at the storm, had another panic attack, and began to sink. “Save me!” he cried. And Jesus reached out to him, and pulled him up again. And stilled the storm.

A miracle? Yes. A miracle. For miracles are just ordinary events or experiences, like storms at sea or crises in our lives, which become extraordinary when something happens which pierces our dullness. Something that broadens our limited understanding in such a way that it shows us the presence, the power and the peace of God. Miracles change our focus and give us eyes of faith. We can always look for miracles in the midst of our fears.

This story from the Gospel contains within it two extremely important biblical truths that are good for us modern, sometimes jaded and cynical, Christians. First, we learn from Peter that we can't do it alone. No matter how tough and strong we think we are. Peter couldn't walk on water in the midst of the storm alone because, alone, he had nothing to focus on except the storm. And second, we don't have to go it alone because God is always somewhere in the storm. It would help us a lot to be able to believe this, rather than letting ourselves leap into a worst case scenario when the first raindrops begin to fall. I happen to think that if we focus our belief and attention on the power of something to destroy us, it will. But the fear that can destroy us can be transformed into the fear that is the beginning of wisdom. That is the fear that is faith: Jesus walking on the water in the midst of the storm. Doing the impossible. That is pretty scary in itself. But nevertheless reassuring.

God is always somewhere in the storm. Always. The hand that reaches out to us is the hand of God. Even though it sometimes may look like the hand of a very human friend, pulling us up, out of the deep, saving us. And the voice that we hear is the voice of God, not only reassuring us, but also confronting and challenging us, saying as Jesus said to Peter: “O you of little faith. Why did you doubt. Come. Come on out here. You can do the impossible.

Tom Henry's Retirement Statement - June 7, 2009

*(following the sermon and the singing of "O Master Let Me Walk with Thee")*

***In hope that sends a shining ray, far down the future's broadening way.***

I love the words to that hymn. And I believe that is what we do here. We send a shining ray out from this place, as we make a joyful sound in the city.

To do that, we sometimes are called to do the impossible, like walking on water; being like Peter; keeping the focus. Today I am asking you to keep your focus. And I am asking you to help me keep my focus over the next 12 months or so. Because together we are going to be walking on water. In the midst of a time that may be choppy, sometimes scary, sometimes spectacular and sometimes beautiful.

I have decided to retire as senior pastor of St. Pauls. That will happen in about a year or so from now. Colleen and I will retire from the work that we have done here for 35 years (and it will be 36 years when it happens.)

The time has come. At least I believe the time has come. Colleen is not so sure, She's not so sure what she will do with me or herself. St. Pauls has pretty much consumed the two of us for all these years. And I mean that in a good way. Mostly! This church has been our home and home to our family as well. Our kids grew up here, from infancy to adulthood. Honestly, I know there will be days when Colleen and I will not be so sure. We will have to keep the focus. We have a common history of 35 years together. And it will be tough for us personally and for our family as well. We love you and have felt your love in so many ways.

But it is time. Time for Team Henry to turn over the ministry here to a new team who will pick it up and in the spirit of St. Paul will "run the race and keep the faith."

We are letting you know this today, even though it is a year or so away, because all of us need time to prepare. In just a moment, Lorne Frank, the president of our congregation, will tell you about some of the plans for the year ahead.

For now and through this coming year...remember: Keep the focus. And keep the faith.

## **SCRIPTURE TEXTS FOR THE SERMON**

### **Isaiah 6: 1-8**

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem

of his robe filled the temple. There were Seraphim in attendance above him; each had six wings. With two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The thresholds of the temple shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

### **Matthew 14:22-33**

Immediately Jesus 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 toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the water, 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." Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward 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 worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."