

OPENING SCENE

If a horror or thriller movie begins with teenagers inside a house on a stormy night, and there is a suspicious noise outside, and one of those teenagers goes outside to “investigate”—one knows what is going to happen next.

If an episode of Star Trek begins with a “routine mission” on a planet, and the away team beams down to collect soil samples in a standard scientific survey, one knows what is going to happen next.

And, if a story from the Gospel of Mark begins with “When Evening had come” and with Jesus saying “let us cross over to the other side” ... One knows what is going to happen next. The disciples will not be experiencing a little R&R in upper Palestine.

FAITH & FEAR:

Instead of a nice relaxing trip on the Lake, the disciples get a death-defying journey across the Sea, and a similarly scary journey into the reality of their discipleship—equal parts terrifying and illuminating.

That combination reminds me of that old expression, “faith and fear” from our prayer book. It appears in the Rite I service when we “pray for those for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear.”¹ That’s a curious pairing, “faith and fear”—an interesting combination.

Those seeming opposites are joined together, with the wisdom of that language being the recognition that the two go hand-in-hand, that the disciples, as well as us, travel our spiritual journeys with a mixture of faith in Jesus, but also a fear, scared of the wind, scared of the Gentiles, scared of the “others” on the other side.

And they did so with good reason, in the following story in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus will face down a demon, who has possessed a man to the point where the man lives in chains. Jesus will drive the demons out, into a herd of pigs, that themselves will

¹ BCP, 330, 489, 504.

be driven off a cliff to perish in the sea.

That's scarier than anything that even the scariest horror movie, or the creepiest Sci-Fi show, could come up with.

The expression "faith and fear" also shows up in the Burial Office, when we pray for those who have "finished their course in your faith and fear."

Many of the disciples were fishermen entirely familiar with the power of the Sea. The disciples then might have been saying a 1st century equivalent of that prayer for one another, as the storm gripped the Sea, the winds howled, and Jesus remained asleep.

FEAR:

Mark clumsily describes the disciples' reaction to Jesus' calming the winds as, literally, "They feared a fear."

Fear is a complex topic in the Bible for, on the one hand, the Old Testament reminds us over and over that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom."² Fear, in another sense, though, moves us away from God, compels us to focus only on the seeming chaos around us, rather than who is at the helm of the ship.

What are *we* the most afraid of in our own lives? Financial issues, the dissolution of an important relationship, declining health, not performing well enough at a job, one's relationship with God, violence in the world.... The list goes on and on. There are a lot of things to be scared of.

How do we negotiate our "Faith and Fear"?

QUESTIONS:

The disciples... often don't look good in Mark's Gospel. In today's story, their faith is tested to the limits. And it is not until even *after* Jesus had calmed the storm, that the disciples "feared a fear."

² Proverbs 1.7, Psalm 111.10

But, one must applaud one specific thing that they did during this perilous boat ride. Out of their combination of “faith and fear” comes the question, after Jesus calmed the storm: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

The disciples had the courage to wonder: “Who is this Jesus?”

For us, that same question needs to be asked, over and over, “Who is this Jesus?” along with: “How do we awake Jesus that sleeps inside of us?”

That will be something that the disciples wrestle with all the way to Jerusalem, and all the way through the rest of their lives.

SO, how do we negotiate our “faith and fear”?

One way is cultivating that sense of wonder, a steady interrogation of all that Life has to offer, a realization that one must always be asking about the tension between one’s own responsibility in action, but also one’s dependency upon God, and the limits of our own efforts.

An attitude of questioning requires faith in not being closed off with predetermined answers, it recognizes that fear will never be completely driven away, and that our lives are ultimately dependent on God. Negotiating that life of faith and fear is best served by living a life full of questions.

With that comes Karl Barth’s great statement about questions and answers: “The Bible does not always answer our questions but sometimes calls our questions into greater question.”³

“People fear miracles because they fear being changed.”⁴ In the end, the disciples wanted peace and escape but instead they got a miracle, and that changed them forever.

³ Karl Barth in Markham, Ian and Oran Warder. 2016. *An Introduction to Ministry: A Primer for Renewed Life and Leadership in Protestant Mainline Congregations*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 201.

⁴ Enger, Leif. *Peace like a River*, 3.

FAITH:

One final thing: “Fear”, literally, gets the last word in Gospel of Mark, in the very last word on the very last page.

As the women go to visit Jesus’ grave after the Crucifixion, they find it empty save an angel telling them that “Jesus had risen, that they should go and tell the disciples, that he is going before you to Galilee.”

Mark records their response “they ran from the tomb, and they told no one, for they were afraid.”⁵ (ἐφοβοῦντο)

It is one of the most stunning editorial decisions in the history of narrative. No resurrection appearance, no ascension, no triumphant commission of the disciples. Mark closes his account with “for they were afraid.”

Remember when the original Star Wars trilogy was going through its run, and the second one, *The Empire Strikes Back*, came out. It ended and there was no tidy resolution. Han Solo is frozen in carbonite, Luke Skywalker has been maimed... Audiences did not know what to do.

The Gospel of Mark has an ending like that, with slightly higher stakes. You read it, and it closes with that terrible thud, and, if you put yourself in the minds of the women at the grave, it is incredibly scary. It’s all up in the air, how does this story end?

The women knew something about “faith and fear.”

Fear, of course, does not get the last word there at the Tomb, nor does it in our story. In the Gospel today, the disciples were afraid, a storm was raging around them. Jesus seemed to be asleep, but he rose, and told them “Peace, be still.”

What a PREVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS. With God, “Fear” never gets the last word. The stage has gone to black, the credits have rolled, but what an amazing SEQUEL that God has in store for us.

AMEN

⁵ Mark 16.