

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

June 18, 2006

Walking by Faith

Mark 4:40

It was more than just a trip across the lake. When Jesus loaded the disciples into the boat to cross the Sea of Galilee, he was making it clear to them that his ministry embraces a wide spectrum of humanity. It includes the Jews who live on one side of the lake and the Gentiles who live on the other side. This is a journey the disciples do not really care to make. They would rather stay on the Jewish side where they can deal with people who are like them. They have no idea how to approach the strangers who live on the other side of the lake. They get in to the boat in response to Jesus' command, but they do so with a real sense of fear.

The sudden storm that they sail into has symbolic value for the disciples. They are expecting another kind of storm as their work begins with the Gentiles on the other side. This lake storm seems like a sign of things to come. But would Jesus pay any heed? Much to the dismay of the disciples he is sleeping peacefully as if the storm does not matter.

At one time or another most of us have known the kind of fear the disciples experienced that day. Nibs Stroupe has described his exposure to this kind of anxiety as a child growing up in the Deep South in the 1950s and 1960s. He remembers those years in these words:

The people of my church...were loving and caring people who taught me who God was and who I was: a child of God...At the same time, though, they taught me about another god, a god who would rival the God I knew in Jesus Christ. They taught me the god of racism, the idea that white people are superior and should be in control. They taught me that black people especially were not human beings like I was, and I believed them. I accepted the lie of racism as a valid understanding of life and of my life. I became captive to racism. They taught me racism not because they were mean and evil people but because they were anxious and fearful people, because they too were captive to racism. I am captive to many other powers, and I learned them all from really decent people ("Looking on the Other Side: Preaching in a Multicultural Society," *Journal For Preachers*, Pentecost 2006, pages 22-23).

Captivity to fear is part of the human experience. Last year one of the high-priced lobbyists in Washington, D.C. was interviewed by *The Washington Post*. He made an offhand remark that may have been the most revealing part of the interview. He said, "There are two engines that drive our nation's capital; one is greed and the other is fear (C. Clifton Black, "Where Do You Want to Eat?" *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 2005, page 301)." The same could be said of every powerful nation in the history of the world. We are not immune from these oppressive powers.

In the 5th chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul describes his liberation from these powers as walking by faith. But this liberation was for Paul a long and painful journey. It began with his studies of the Jewish law under a famous teacher, Gamaliel. Gamaliel taught Paul that obedience to God's will would set him free from the destructive powers of this world. But Paul put all that aside when he was

exposed to the new Christian sect. He could not follow his teacher's tolerant attitude toward the Christians. Paul let his fear of this new movement get the better of him. As fear evolved into hatred Paul became a brutal persecutor of Christians. Paul's captivity to fear continued unabated until something happened to him on the road to Damascus. A mysterious encounter with the Christ that he hated left him blind. The blindness persisted until he sought out the people that he feared and demonized. These strangers taught him to appreciate the scriptures from a profoundly different perspective. His eyes were opened. He was liberated from his captivity to fear. At last he knew what it meant to walk by faith.

An early example of walking by faith is found in the Book of Exodus. There we read of two obscure women named Shiphrah and Puah. They were midwives serving Hebrew slaves. They were under orders from the Egyptian Pharaoh to kill every male child at birth. The most powerful ruler in the world has turned them into agents of his policy of genocide. But word reached Pharaoh that his policy was not working. So he summoned these powerless women to give account of their ineffective work. He asks them why they have let so many male children live. They tell him that they just can't get there fast enough. Then they roll out the racial stereotype that Pharaoh has already bought into. "These Hebrews are like rabbits. They are having kids right and left." Kristen Saldine has described their response in these words:

Shiphrah and Puah's answer is quick, funny, and shows street smarts. It's also very subversive. Pharaoh fears the Hebrews because they are too many and they are multiplying. Shiphrah and Puah take Pharaoh's worst fear, roll it up, and punch him right in the gut—all the while smiling and shrugging, "Gee whiz, sorry, but what do you expect (*The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 2005, page 296)?"

These two women refused to be the instruments of Pharaoh's fear. They did not do what the king commanded because they believed in a living God. They knew very well that God does not sanction genocide. They chose to walk by faith and not by fear.

This is the choice that Mark wanted his readers to make. Mark was acutely aware that the churches for which he was writing were facing severe persecution. The Christian movement had become the convenient scapegoat for social turmoil and economic dislocation. A storm on the Sea of Galilee symbolizes for Mark the demonic forces of chaos which rebel against God and persecute the faithful. Mark understood that the power of these demonic forces comes from their skill in generating and manipulating fear. It is this kind of fear that assaults the disciples as their boat is tossed by the wind and waves on the Sea of Galilee. Yet Jesus sleeps as if the world were not ruled by fear.

When Jesus wakes up he surveys the situation. He sees the demonic ferocity of the waves and the paralyzing fear which grips the disciples. He rebukes the wind and commands the sea to be still. Suddenly everything is calm. Then he speaks to the disciples inviting them to walk by faith. But what Mark wants us to notice is that the power of Jesus in this situation is the power of the teacher. It is the teacher who sees the truth about the demons. In the light of that truth the power of the demonic evaporates. It is the teacher who shows us how to overcome our fear.

As the story ends the disciples say to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him (Mark 4:41)?" It is the one who teaches us to walk by faith and not by fear.

