

Questions of Jesus

3. "Why do you doubt? Why do you fear? Where is your faith?"

Text: Luke 8:22-25

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Imagine with me that we're taking a field trip to Boston this morning. We're all packed in cozy and tight in my Subaru. Our destination is the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum not far from Fenway Park. There is a curious story for us to discover there – one that takes root in the passage that we heard moments ago.

It's the usual museum setting you might conjure with high ceilings and large spaces for the display of famous art. And as we begin to explore we come upon a huge empty frame in the very center of the gallery. We lean in to read the annotation and find that this is where one of Rembrandt's most famous paintings was displayed – in fact his only painted seascape called "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee."

But in the wee hours of March 18, 1990 the empty frame was left behind as thieves dressed up as police and pulled off the biggest art heist in United States history. It's has been missing ever since. Even though new evidence of the crime surfaced in 2013 the mystery remains unsolved. To this day, the FBI considers it an open case.¹

Back in the day, that frame held one of the greatest masterpieces of New Testament drama. It was the sudden storm on Galilee and the boat-bound reactions and responses of fourteen men. Our scripture passage today describes the sea as absolutely wild with wind and waves. Five of the twelve disciples were desperately trying to manage on the forward deck; one clinging to the stays, two others lowering the sails, and another holding tight to the mast. Meanwhile in the stern were the rest of them, cowering some, fearful others, one seasick and heaving over the rail, another struggling with the tiller.

Wait. Did I mention that there were fourteen of them? Twelve disciples plus Jesus makes thirteen, so who might the other be?² The extra man on the boat is Rembrandt in self-portrait, holding his head with one hand in disbelief at what was happening and grasping to a rope in the other for dear life. He had placed himself right in the middle because, for most of us, that is precisely where we live our lives. We can surmise that the great artist wanted to know first hand what it would have felt like to be there so that his interpretation on canvas would truly reflect the experience.

Pretty smart I'd say! What better place to have a closer look? Right in the middle, indeed. And in the middle of that day, the middle of that wind, the middle of that boat, the middle of that storm, all kinds of drama was unfolding.

For one: fear ran through almost all of them. Rembrandt even paints fright and terror on some of those faces, and understandably so, even his own. And we all know this to be true. When storms of whatever variety blow into our lives fear is an unstoppable default. Fear is a very powerful emotion in life. It can summon our lesser angels in a heartbeat.

Still consider, fear is not a fixed or static point. It is dynamic and morphs in all kinds of ways. We all live somewhere on the spectrum of our own temperament and experience. We are all different. Imagine pure fear (if there is such a thing) being at one end and pure courage (an ideal construct as well) being at the other.

Interesting, in another place scripture, Paul tells us “perfect love casts out fear.” As if to say that by the power of love we can face our fears. But it may also be that the flip side of that is true, too: “perfect fear casts out love.”³ That is, when we are most afraid, the power of love, the capacity to see and seek the best for others takes a back seat, even if only for a while. Sounds a lot like the times in which we live.

And so Jesus asks, right in the middle of that boat and into the middle of our lives. **Why do you fear?** Or in another version: Where is your trust?

But that’s not all. Huge doses of doubt were right on board with them, too. Doubt about whether they were ever going to get home again. Doubt about the power of Jesus to do anything. Doubt about whether they could wake him up. Doubt about what in the world they were doing in the first place, this movement of revolutionary love. And doubt about what they had gotten themselves into.

Why do you doubt? He asked it straight up as they bobbed in the waves. **Where is your faith?**

It was not a litmus test kind of asking. Jesus was not ever that way. He was not binary: you either have it or you don’t. He was not judging between some ideal that none of us are able to attain. He knew that doubt is not a bad thing in and of itself; or fear for that matter. And we know that just like fear and love, doubt and faith are not either-or. It’s all about life on this spectrum.

I’ve told you before about a great lesson from my dad. It was at a time when confusion and doubt had their way with me. It was during my second year in college, perhaps my lowest ebb. I had lost just about all my sense for any faith at all. Most troubling to me about this, is that I had begun to think seriously that I wanted to be a minister!

Well, my father, ever a wise pastor, helped me to know that the struggle with doubt was a necessary part of spiritual maturation. It was not, as I had assumed, faith’s opposite. He said, “You know Geordie, life very rarely presents itself as all or nothing, and the same is true with faith. Sometimes it all boils down to the balance of 49 to 51

percent. If your faith can tip the scales to 51 percent then go with it and you will discover the rest along the way.”⁴ He was so right. And my 51 percent at that formative age is why I am standing before you today.

Jesus again: Why do you fear? Who do you trust? Where is your faith? Why do you doubt? He asked the whole motley crew of them, even the stowaway Rembrandt!

And then he did an amazing thing. He stood up in that boat and spoke to the wind: “Peace! Be still!” And he turned to the water and spoke to the waves: “Quiet down! Stop!” In an instant, the lake that was ferocious became calm and peaceful and smooth.

In whatever way this story of Jesus touches you today, please, let it in. In whatever way you can hear his questions, please, pay attention. And in whatever way you might respond these weeks before Easter may it be as the stowaway and the twelve who said to one another in pure astonishment: “Who is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?”

In the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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¹ Google search: “The Storm on the Sea of Galilee.” Also, “Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum” on Google and Wikipedia.

² Hidde Hoekstra. Rembrandt and the Bible. Magna Books, 1990, pp. 312-313. See also: Martin Copenhaver. Jesus is the Question. Abingdon Press, 2014, pp. 35-37.

³ Walter Brueggemann offers this as a provocative and contrasting phrase to Paul’s affirmation about love.

⁴ My father attributed this helpful balance of 49/51 percent to Martin Marty, Senior Editor Emeritus of The Christian Century, and Theologian Paul Tillich.