So, Peter, faith muzzling fear, reviews the facts for his accusers. “What have I done? A man who could not walk now walks. No harm, no foul.” Like Peter, in fearful situations we need to take stock of what is happening and ask ourselves: What precisely do we fear? Should we fear this thing? Are we in the wrong? Are we the instrument of our own misfortune? Are we our own worst enemy? If so, then it is clear we need to re-evaluate our behavior and the choices we make. But if not, then the matter may be beyond our control and is probably best left in the hands of God.

Peter was in a good place spiritually, his faith grounded in Jesus Christ. “This man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 4:10). In Jesus, Peter found strength and knew his future to be assured, no matter what happened at his trial. Speaking of Jesus, Peter said “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). With such confidence, Peter could only have hope. Peter’s faith held his fear in check.

What is intriguing about Martel’s story is that Pi, the kid in the boat, moved from plotting to rid himself of the tiger, to understanding that the tiger was the key to his survival. Pi faced his fear and found in it a reason to live. When we feel like a kid in a lifeboat with a hungry tiger in the prow, balancing our fear with our faith will be critical to our survival. Learning to weather adversity makes us strong, in faith and in life.

Peter understood this. After the authorities released him, Peter met with others to pray about what to do next. Notice what he prays: “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (4:29). Peter did not pray for God to ditch his fears or slay life’s tigers. He understood that the twin tigers of fear and adversity would always be in the boat with him. Peter prayed for boldness in his walk and in his witness because he knew God would be in the boat with him.

Everybody has a tiger in their boat. What you do with the tiger is what makes all the difference. We need not ask God to shoot it, tranquilize it, train it to do tricks or jump through hoops. In fact, we need not pray for the tiger at all. We should pray for ourselves! When we do, we will realize that God is in the boat with us, strengthening us, and we really have nothing to fear! As Oswald Chambers said: “The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.”

In Hebrew Scripture, the word “fear” is frequently used in a way that means far more than simply being scared. “Fear-of-the-Lord” is the awareness of God’s presence or power or revelation in our lives. Fear-of-the-Lord puts us in our place, not at the center of God’s universe. Fear-of-the-Lord reminds us that we are not the sum-total of what matters. Fear-of-the-Lord means even when we do not know what is going to happen next, we do not need to because God knows.

Fear-of-the-Lord keeps us on our toes with our eyes open. Something is going on around here, and we do not want to miss it. Fear-of-the-Lord prevents us from thinking that we know it all. And it therefore prevents us from closing off our minds or our perceptions from what is new. Fear-of-the-Lord prevents us from acting presumptuously and therefore destroying or violating some aspect of beauty, truth, or goodness that we do not recognize or do not understand. Fear-of-the-Lord is fear with the scary element deleted.

The Gospels list some 125 Christ-issued imperatives. Of these, 21 urge us to “not be afraid” or “not fear” or “have courage” or “take heart” or “be of good cheer.” The second most common command, to love God and neighbor, appears on only eight occasions. If quantity is any indicator, Jesus takes our fears seriously. The one statement he made more than any other was this: don’t be afraid.

But we are afraid. We are afraid when we are suddenly caught off our guard and do not know what to do. We are afraid when our presuppositions and assumptions no longer account for what we are up against, and we do not know what will happen to us. We are afraid when reality, without warning, is shown to be either more or other than we thought it was. In truth, we fear what we cannot control.

The world feels very out-of-control these days. I see a lot of fear in people. That fear is crippling us. Fear causes us to retreat rather than advance. Fear causes us to snipe at each other, rather than speak kind words. Fear causes us to doubt, rather than trust in God. But when we harness that fear, get it under control, we may find ourselves growing in unexpected ways. When Fear-of-the-Lord replaces our fear-of-the-world, we can pray as Peter did, for the strength to walk and witness with great boldness.

Faith does not take away fear. Instead, faith offers the assurance that God is the Unseen Third Presence in the boat, no matter how small your boat may be or how big your ocean is. There are a tremendous number of things that try to swamp our boat: seas of cancer; storms of grief; tidal waves of pandemic restrictions; monsoons of contrasting information about politics, race, or the environment; waterfalls of worry about family or career or money; or simply the streams of things that go bump in the night. Do we, can we, will we, still love God, trust God, hope in God amid life’s dreadful calamities? When fear, like a tiger, leaps into our boat, faith reminds us that God is there to keep us upright.

Prayer: Lord, I have no clue how I am ever going to rid this fear from my life. I feel as though something always knocks me down and I can never get my feet secure. I need your power and might to show me that I am no longer a slave to fear, but I am a beloved child of yours.

Jesus, you call me out on the open water, and I am scared. I do not know how to stand in your strength and love. I do not feel confident I will not drown in all of this. Help me to trust you through this trial. Help me not to sink.

Spirit God, You go before me and you are with me, always. What is there to fear when You, my powerful King, are with me? God, I need Your Light to breakthrough this darkness. Amen.

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**Pi and a Tiger**

Sunday, September 26, 2021 Acts 4:5-12

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

It is a tale about a boy in a boat. With a tiger. Yann Martel’s fantastic and metaphorical book about faith, *Life of Pi,* is a story that explores faith by putting it to the test in the heart of catastrophe. Pi is the sole human survivor of a cargo ship that sinks in the Pacific Ocean while transporting his family and animals from his family’s zoo in India to Canada, where they hoped to start a new life. For 227 days, Pi drifts in a lifeboat with a 450-pound Bengal tiger that Pi rescues as the ship sinks. This is not a cute and cuddly story about a boy and a kitten. This is an engaging, dangerous, and fascinating story about faith and survival.

As Pi adjusts to his grief and his terrifying situation (terror outside and inside the boat) he plots to rid himself of the tiger. But over time, Pi discovers that it is the presence of the tiger that gives him the courage and determination he needs to survive. As a metaphor for life, this story establishes the truth that sometimes we need to live with what we fear, or what we do not understand, or what challenges us if we are to survive a greater trial. Faith and fear become partners in the boat.

No one knew this better than the apostle Peter. He had great faith, professing to Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” (Matthew 16:16). He also knew great fear, swearing: “Woman, I don’t know [Jesus]” (Luke 22:57). But for Peter, faith and fear could not coexist. Peter stood strong in faith in the absence of fear; he collapsed in fear in the absence of faith.

The post-Resurrection, post-Ascension, and post-Pentecost Peter was a different Peter from the one who cowered before the accusations of a maid near the cross. Through those experiences, Peter learned to let faith keep fear at bay. In Acts 3, Peter meets a lame man, and heals him. A huge crowd witnessed the healing, and Peter used the opportunity to preach, telling the startled crowds that Jesus rose from the dead. Then the authorities stepped in and hauled Peter off to jail.