

When I was a kid, I hated staying at this one friend's house because he claimed it to be haunted. Weird stuff always happened, like chandeliers moving for no reason. The worst was when we watched *Poltergeist* at the Baron Theater and then spent the night at his house, Yikes! Let's just say I didn't spend much time at his home after that.

The cemetery in my hometown had an older section in which the gravestones glowed at night. The older kids would tell us horrific stories about it and that kept me away from the cemetery at night for a long time.

I've since outgrown those fears, but I haven't outgrown fear itself. I've been in the same boat as the disciples in today's gospel. Maybe you have too. Those old ghost stories changed, into adulthood ghost stories. I suspect that's true for all of us. We all have our fears. We all have our own ghost stories. Regardless of whether ghosts are real, fear is. I'll bet each one of you could tell a story about fear in your life. Something

about a ghost that haunts and frightens you because, let's face it, there are all sorts of fears and ghosts in our lives.

We fear our own death, and of our loved ones. We fear the loss of health, security, success, and reputation. We fear failure and what others will think about us. We fear being out of control and powerless. We fear the unknown, what will happen, and what might not happen. We fear others; those who look, act, and believe differently than us. We fear not being enough and being found out. Each one of you could add to the list.

I've come to believe that fear is a primary driver and controller of our lives. I've experienced that in my own life and I've seen it in the lives of others. I've seen how it can take hold of us, distort our vision, and drown our lives. Fear often determines the choices we make, the words we say, the actions we take, and the prayers we offer.

Look at the events in today's world and you'll see fear. It's one thing both sides in any conflict have in common. Listen to the voices in your head and you'll hear fear. It's usually the loudest and most talkative. Read the headlines and you'll find stories of fear. Study the

scriptures and you'll discover that the most common thing God tells his people is to not be afraid. And yet, most of us are. We've rowed the same boat as the disciples. We've been tossed about by the storms of life. We've seen the ghost and we've cried out in fear. (pause)

Have you ever felt as if your world is drenched in darkness? Have the waves of life ever battered, tortured, and harassed you? Does it sometimes seem like you are rowing against the wind and making no headway? Have you ever found yourself alone, far from land and a safe harbor?

If you know what that's like, then you know what it was like for the disciples in today's gospel. Under some circumstances it's easy to see ghosts, to be terrified, and to cry out in fear. That's what happened to the disciples and it happens to us. It's happening throughout our world.

The world today is crying out in fear. Some cry out with tears and screams of horror. Some cry out with silence. Some cry out through paralysis, not knowing what to say or do. Some cry out with rockets and

bombs. Some cry out with political rhetoric and posturing. In whatever way we do it, at some point we all cry out in fear.

More often than not we cry out to be rescued from the circumstances of which we are afraid. We want to escape the storm and avoid the ghost. We want to be picked up and set down somewhere else, somewhere that is safe, calm, and comfortable. Jesus doesn't do that. He didn't do that for the disciples and he doesn't do that for us. Instead, Jesus reveals himself, speaks, and comes to the disciples in and from the very midst of the storm itself. He did not take the disciples out of their storm, he entered their storm.

Jesus does not come to us from outside our storms and fears like some divine search and rescue mission. Yet, that's often where we look for him, outside the circumstances of our lives. We are too easily persuaded that the solution to dire circumstances comes only from outside the circumstances themselves. That is the exact opposite of what today's gospel tells us.

Jesus came to the disciples walking on the water, through the wind, and in the darkness. Jesus' peace, words of comfort, and presence are

not outside the storm but in the eye of the storm. So why do we not look for him in that place, in the place of our fear? That's where Jesus shows up. Where else would he be, this one we call Emmanuel, God with us? If Jesus is not in our storms and fears then he is not Emmanuel. He is not God-with-us.

I wonder if we sometimes miss what's really happening in today's gospel. If all we see is a gravity defying water walking Jesus, then we have missed the miracle. The wind and the waves are about more than the weather conditions. They are more descriptive of what is happening within the disciples than what is happening around them.

The real miracle in this story is that Jesus walks on the storms that brew and rage within us. That means divine power and presence have and always will trample on, overcome, and conquer human fear. It means that Jesus is Emmanuel. He is with us in the direst of circumstances. But the disciples could not recognize this. Sometimes we don't either. "It's a ghost," they screamed in terror. It's the only thing that made sense. People don't walk on water. It had to be a ghost.

What else could it be? That is the power of fear to deceive, distort, and drown.

It makes no sense to think that the very elements that threaten our lives are the same elements from which new life comes. Yet, isn't that the way of the cross? Isn't that the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection? Isn't that the good news we so desperately want and need to hear? Isn't that what happened in today's gospel?

Our storms and fears are the place in which we abandon ourselves to God. Most of us, however, don't do that until we first feel abandoned by God. Surely that's how the disciples must have felt. Jesus made them, compelled them, to get in the boat and cross the sea seemingly alone. They had been abandoned to the open sea, the darkness, the waves, the wind, the futility of their own efforts, fantasies, and illusions. They were abandoned to their own un-self-sufficiency so that they might abandon themselves to God.

The very elements that threatened to destroy the disciples became the environment in which they recognized Jesus as the Son of God.

What they first perceived as certain death they now recognize as new life, hope, and salvation.

Every time we cry out in fear Jesus comes to us saying, “Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” That’s the invitation to abandon ourselves to God in the midst of our storms and fears. How hard it is to hear and heed those words when the waves are breaking, the wind is howling, and the ghost is approaching.

“Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” No matter how high the waves build, they are the waves on which Jesus walks to us. No matter how strong the wind blows, it is the wind through which Jesus walks to us. No matter how dark the night, it is the night in which Jesus comes to us. No matter how great our fear, it is the fear that Christ has already trampled on and defeated.

“Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” Thanks be to God. Amen.