

As we continue our study of Matthew, we're going to read today two stories in which Jesus acts in the midst of people's fear.

We all have fears or phobias. You know some of the common fears. For example, what is claustrophobia? The fear of small spaces. How about arachnophobia? The fear of spiders. Here are a few more that you might not know. Coulrophobia? It's the fear of clowns. How about alektorophobia? The fear of chickens. Omphalophobia is the fear of bellybuttons. And my personal favorite: hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia. It's a 36-letter word with which you can dominate in Scrabble. It is the fear of long words.

We all have phobias, but there are also other fears. There are fears that go to the core of who we are as people, and how we operate in the world. These are fears that threaten to undo us. For example—the fear of failure, the fear of abandonment, the fear of loss, the fear of not being heard, the fear of not being known.

Those fears create a crisis in us. We fight, hide, and avoid facing these fears because they seem unconquerable. You go out of your way to avoid the person who always seems to say the one, perfect thing that destroys your confidence. You don't speak up because the last time you were mocked. You avoid taking a risk because the last attempt failed.

We live with the crisis of the fears that go to the core of who we are. We long for things to be different. We look for ways to face these fears, for hope for something that will give an answer to that which seems unconquerable.

As Matthew continues telling the story of Jesus on earth, we're going to read two stories of people who faced a crisis. In their crisis, Jesus acted in ways that only He can act to bring a new way forward.

In these stories, we're going to see that crisis is the setting in which Jesus does what only Jesus can do. Because of that, we have an opportunity to face what threatens to undo us. And when we do, we'll see Jesus act in ways we wouldn't have expected.

Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and

woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" (Matthew 8:23-25)

Jesus and His close disciples are in a boat when a sudden, fierce storm overtakes them. This is not a simple rainstorm; the word in the original language is the same word used for an earthquake. Literally, the storm was a "giant shaking;" the waves covered the boat.

The disciples were afraid that they would die. They faced a crisis and they went to Jesus with the hope that He could do something.

He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" (verses 26-27)

Jesus' response to them is seemingly bizarre. He asks the disciples, "Why are you afraid?" Should they not be afraid? What is Jesus saying? As you read the encounters of Jesus and people, He will pose questions like this that have seemingly obvious answers. He encounters someone who is sick and will ask, "Do you want to be healed?" He meets someone in need and asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" I think that Jesus asks those questions not because He is unaware, but to draw out a willingness to engage in a deeper reality. There is something more going on that Jesus wants to discuss.

In this situation, the disciples were afraid, but why? They were afraid of the storm. They were afraid of the storm, but they were afraid because they weren't convinced Jesus could do anything about their fear. The wind and waves will go away, but they still have to face Jesus. Jesus uses the situation of the storm to engage them on who they understand Him to be, and what He has the power to do.

Jesus brings up the concept of faith. It's a big concept, but we can look back earlier in chapter 8 to see what about faith Jesus highlights. The faith of the leper and the centurion that was celebrated was a conviction that Jesus has the power to do something about their lives. They were convinced that Jesus could do what only Jesus can do. In the boat, Jesus is asking the disciples, Do you believe that?

With that question hanging in the air, Jesus acts for the good of His followers. It's a bizarre scene: a man stands in a boat and yells at the waves—and they respond. Jesus stops the storm. Interestingly, this act of calming a storm is talked about by the Psalmist in 107:29. The Psalmist says that a storm is stilled to a whisper and the waves are hushed. The One who does this is the Lord.

They respond with a rhetorical question, but that expresses their response to what happened: "What sort of person is this?" Jesus calms the storm, what the disciples were afraid of. And Jesus also shows that He is who He has claimed to be. The disciples faced the prospect that God is on earth, standing in front of them.

When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. "What do you want with us, Son of God?" they shouted. "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" (verses 28-29)

After a stormy sea, Jesus and His followers reach their destination and encounter two demon-possessed men. The raging of the seas is now raging in human beings. These two men are demon-possessed, violent, and a threat to other people. The crisis of the sea is now in human beings. This isn't how humanity should be. How will Jesus respond to this crisis?

We see a glimpse of the way forward in the declaration made by the demons in calling Jesus, "Son of God." If you were with us on Christmas Eve, we saw how this was a common term in Jesus' day. It was by Rome (about Caesar), and it was used by the Greeks before them (about Alexander the Great). For the Jews, "son of God" was linked to the figure of the Messiah. When the Messiah came, He would establish God's way on earth—the kingdom of God. He would be God's representation—the son of God. The Messiah would set the world right, including dealing with what is wrong with humanity.

Interestingly, the first affirmation of Jesus as Son of God comes not from the disciples, someone who heard His sermons, or a person healed. Rather, it happens here by demons. These evil spirits know that Jesus can do something about the crisis that they created because they know who Jesus is.

But don't lose sight of the purpose of what is about to happen. Jesus sees that something is wrong with human beings. He confronts the crisis and will do something about it for the good of these two men. Watch what happens next.

Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, "If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs."

He said to them, "Go!" So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region. (verses 30-34)

Jesus acts for the good of two men. Like the calming of the sea, it is a bizarre scene: Demons enter a herd of pigs, who then go for a swim. Left standing are two men who are different than they were a moment ago.

It seems a bit strange; why the dramatic scene with the pigs? Couldn't Jesus have just healed these two people a different way? Similarly, Jesus could have calmed the storm without a word spoken. Why does Jesus act in the way that He does? Perhaps the answer reveals His character.

Imagine you are one of these two people; tormented day and night by an evil spirit. Someone that you don't know comes along and says, I cast out your demons. You may wonder, is that false hope? Or is my torment over and I'm finally free? Maybe Jesus used the dramatic stampede of pigs to help these two sufferers believe that they are finally free. Jesus brings good to people in deep need for things to be different.

At that moment, the townspeople come to see what they heard was happening and they ask Jesus to leave. We're not told the reason. Maybe the pigs represented their business and Jesus shut things down. Maybe they saw the two people who had evoked constant fear in everyone were now changed and they couldn't handle the change. Whatever the reason, their plea represents tragedy in the story. The townspeople lost sight of the value of people. Yes, the pigs are dead, but humanity is restored. Which matters more?

Jesus dealt with the crisis in humanity by doing what only He could do. And He did it for the good of people. We see Jesus act for the good of people in each of these stories. It is for the good of the disciples that they see Jesus can do what only He can do. It is for the good of the two demon-possessed men that they are set free. In the midst of crisis, Jesus brings life when a crisis threatens to destroy.

Crisis is the setting in which Jesus does what only Jesus can do. Because of that, we have an opportunity to face what threatens to undo us. And when we do, we'll see Jesus act in ways we wouldn't have expected.

What do we do with this? A couple of things. First, take one step deeper in understanding who you are by taking time to examine what fear.

I don't mean spiders or clowns (well, maybe clowns because they are kind of creepy). But can you identify what threatens to undo you? We mentioned some earlier: the fear of failure, the fear of abandonment, the fear of loss, the fear of not being heard, the fear of not being known. There are others that are specific to your work, family, and life circumstances. I've done some of this work the past few weeks, and, though it's difficult to face the raw "you," it's incredibly helpful in making sense of how I engage the world. Take one step deeper in understanding yourself.

The second thing that you can do with what you learn about yourself is to take one step closer to Jesus. You take one step closer to Jesus when you ask Him to confront the fears within you. You take one step closer to Jesus when you open up a part of your life that you've kept to yourself. You take one step closer to Jesus when you ask Jesus to do what only Jesus can do. When you take one step closer to Jesus, He brings life in a way that only He can do.

"We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely

on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8b-9). Paul talked about how the life of Jesus helped him in his crisis. He faced fears that threatened to undo him; he couldn't go on anymore. But he discovered that the moment of crisis is when God does what only He can do—He raises the dead; He brings to life what is threatened to be destroyed.

Maybe that is you today. Maybe you are faced with the fear that threatens to undo you. Maybe you started out well, but a storm suddenly formed around you. Maybe you feel the turmoil of what's wrong with life and you long to be who you were created to be. This life is what Jesus offers to you. God loves you. He showed you that love through the death of Jesus on the cross. He died so that you could live. His death conquers the crisis that seems unconquerable to you.

What do you fear? What do you need Jesus to do that only He can do?

Take one step closer to Jesus and watch Him bring life where you wouldn't expect.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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