

## 7B 2021

Much like today's gospel passage, in which we find the disciples terrified in a windstorm on the Sea of Galilee, John Wesley encountered a great storm when he was traveling with his brother, Charles, to the American colony of Georgia in 1735.

As the storm raged, the ship would surge upward to the top of the waves, pause weightlessly, and then screw down the other side, as if into a hole far beneath the top of the crests.

Wesley spent some time praying with the terrified English passengers.

Afterwards, he joined a service held onboard by German Moravian families.

While he was with them, a great wave surged over the ship and water poured into the cabins.

The English passengers were heard screaming in terror while the Moravians calmly continued singing hymns—men, women, and children, all unperturbed.

Observing them, John Wesley realized that these Moravians possessed something that he lacked: an absolute trust in God.

The experience sent him on a quest that is thought to have influenced his founding of the Methodist movement.

The Moravians were not calm because they were confident they would survive.

They had not succumbed, in other words, to magical thinking, the belief that things will just turn out well.

Theologically, magical thinking holds that, if we just pray hard enough and in the right way, we can have whatever we desire—sunny weather every day without drought.

We can be David to every Goliath.

The Moravians were not so benighted.

They were calm instead because they knew that, whatever happened to them on this plane of existence, God would not abandon them.

God had sent them on a journey in life, a journey that would take them where it would, and that would end when it did, at which point they would return to God.

At no point along the way would God abandon them.

Wesley, on the other hand, though he was aware of God's presence, clearly was not confident that it was inalienable.

He worried not only, therefore, that he might lose his life, but that he would lose God.

This is where fear ultimately originates, from our mistaken notion that God might abandon us,

but as Paul says to the Romans, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor

depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Once we identify our fundamental fear and understand that it is unfounded, we develop the faith demonstrated by the Moravians.

This is why we say that faith is the opposite of fear.

Faith means that we trust that God will never let go of us.

Once we set that in our minds, our outlook changes.

Our fear subsides and we are unlikely to get lost.

Whether in storm or death, we understand that we can never be separated from the love of God.

The disciples, however, were brought up in a religion of obedience to a demanding, unforgiving father and are as yet unable to embrace the truth of God’s abiding love.

They had exchanged the subtle certainty of God’s unremitting presence for the more palpable power of the demanding father, which requires less faith.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” the disciples ask accusingly.

Like most of us, they are convinced that God is not doing his job to protect them.

They feel fearful and abandoned, two things that we see go hand in hand.

They think that God, in other words, might be like a pagan god, might become neglectfully distracted or get peevish and cast them off.

Christ responds to the disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

In other words, “Do you still not understand that you have an unbreakable bond with God?”

Like Wesley, the disciples sense their profound *connection* to God, but they do not yet trust that the bond is *indestructible*.

From the outset, some of us sense the bond itself more clearly than others.

Less spiritually mature than Wesley, they experience God’s presence the way a fish experiences wet.

You may recall that I told you a story about a young man who died twice as a result of the same incident.

He found out for the first time what not-wet is like.

By this, I mean that, while dead, he visited a place where God felt absent.

He described it as a hopeless, gray, lifeless.

Through this experience, he understood that, in life, though he had not understood it, he had never been without God’s constant presence.

To be clear, it was not that God had abandoned him, but that he had lost his way and abandoned God.

As C.S. Lewis said, the gates of hell are locked from the inside.

In life, the young man had been unaware of God's presence, had taken it for granted, had not claimed it and was unwilling to claim it in death, or perhaps felt unworthy of claiming it, and his awareness had strayed far from God.

Many who are unaware of God's presence or who doubt its dependability think that their fears are incited primarily by those outside, by those who are different, those who disagree with them.

Rather than acknowledging their fear of abandonment by God, in other words, they project it onto the world around them and imagine that, if they vanquish all their enemies, only then will they feel safe.

People attempt to exclude people from their nation, their neighborhood, their churches.

Some societies opt for imprisonment to accomplish this.

The United States has 4.4 percent of the world's population, but 22 percent of the world's prisoners, or 1 out of every 143 Americans.<sup>1</sup>

Others attempt to vanquish their perceived enemies through genocide.

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1 <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/01/16/percent-incarcerated/>

Yet once we kill or incarcerate those who frighten us, our fear remains to find a new  
“instigator.”

The Puritans, for example, feared the Anglicans and eventually made their way to the  
American colonies, where, in the absence of their former enemies, they famously  
started hunting one another.

The solution is to open wide our hearts, as Paul encourages the Corinthians to do,  
To open our hearts and embrace God’s inalienable love.

This changes how we view the world.

Through faith, Paul explains to the rowdy Corinthians, he has endured afflictions,  
hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights,  
hunger.”

He expounds, “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are  
well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as  
sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing,  
and yet possessing everything.”

By “everything,” Paul means the inalienable love of God.

He shares an awareness of that with others to make them rich, to make them fully alive.

Knowing that we have come from God, abide with God, and return to God changes our perspective.

We are no longer afraid of the storms of life, whether literal or figurative.

We deepen our knowledge of this by naming our fear and reminding ourselves of the truth of God's constancy—God is not only present with us; that presence cannot be lost.

In other words, we must ask ourselves, is our life determined by our fear of abandonment, or by our faith in God?

The more we trust God's inalienable love, the less we fear.