

24 June 2018

Texts: Mark 4: 40 “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Job 38:1 “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”

From *The Message* II Corinthians:11-13 “Dear, dear Corinthians, I can’t tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn’t fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren’t small, but you’re living them in a small way. I’m speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!”

NOW IS THE ACCEPTABLE TIME

I don’t know if the swamping of the boat in very bad weather was designed as a test of faith by Jesus, but that is what it ended up being. There was Jesus, curled up on what was probably the only cushion in the boat, sleeping soundly – in spite of the wind and waves putting so much water into the boat that it was in danger of swamping, and when his fellow travelers woke him and said “do you not care that we are perishing?” his response, after calming the wind and seas, was quick and annoyed “why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Now, drop back in time a few hundred years to the Wisdom literature in the Old Testament and you have a wonderful theological/psychological soap opera. Imagine, for a moment, you have a lot of soap to sell and a very large advertising budget. The plot is a wealthy and very proper religious man who is minding his own business when along come God and the Devil. God is exercising bragging rights about Job and Satan will have none of it. He says good enough that your pet man is a true believer while everything is going his way, but if he should lose his possessions and family he would curse you. Well, to God it seemed like a good bet so he unleashed Satan and we viewers are given a taste of personal catastrophe replete with well intentioned friends giving convincing, but not entirely sound advice. This would all culminate in a test of faith and an examination of the relationship of God to humankind. Add to the plot-line Nobel winning writing and you have the book of Job. By the end of the viewing season we know that all ends well with Job having 14000 sheep, 6000 camels, 1000 teams of oxen and 1000 donkeys – he lives another 140 years and dies an old man, full of life. . This has to be on the Hallmark channel.

Trying to avoid frontal lobe time-line whiplash, let us go 60 to 80 years after the death of Jesus where we find Paul dealing with the issue of faith in a more subtle manner. Paul says “we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.” Peterson’s translation is even more direct: “please don’t squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us.”

Wide-open, spacious life. Peterson continues, “Dear, dear Corinthians, I can’t tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn’t fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren’t small, but you’re living them in a small way.” Ah, now we see the real test of faith. It rests not in over-coming our fears of life’s tempests nor in surviving loses of goods and family. The real measure of faith is our ability to live the spacious life.

Page two

Paul reminds us that while our lives are not small, we are living them in a small way. For those of us who have a life in the spirit of God, our lives are large – all CAPITAL letters – full of loud affirmation of ourselves being in the very image of God! What does Paul mean when he says that we are living in a small way? One suspects that he means we have created our own fences because he is quick to say “we didn’t fence you in.”

The fences we build are built because of a lack of faith, a taking of God’s grace in vain. We each construct our own fences, but here are a few common ones – I know that they are common, because I helped to build them!

The guilt fence is a favorite. It is built out of the bits and pieces of sin we have accumulated over our life spans. It is a fence that allows us to say that “we are not worthy.” And, obviously, if we are not worthy, there are many things in life that we cannot do. That includes building good interpersonal relationships. The guilt fence keeps others at arm’s length. It is a wonderful way to avoid meaningful commitments! We tend to forget that in God’s eyes we have no guilt, “now is the day of salvation!”

The ego fence is another way to live our lives in a small way. We don’t like to put our sense of self at risk. Some times the biggest egos are the most fragile. Big or small we protect our egos by building such a small fence that eventually it can contain only the “me” of a person. When all things become meaningful only in the light of “me” then the fence allows absolutely no compassionate or empathetic connection to the larger world.

Many of us design a fence, awkward in design, but deceptively innocuous, called **the low expectations fence**. It is built just high enough to keep meaningful achievements at bay. What better way to assure a small life than to proclaim to oneself that I don’t expect much out of life. I often see this in parish life. “Why spend all of that money on maintenance when we will have to close the church in a few years anyway” or “I don’t see any point in evangelism, everyone who is really interested in being in church is already a member of some other church anyway.” A low expectations fence keeps failure away. Whether as an individual or an institution, you can’t fail when you don’t try. Of course, you can’t succeed either!

Conclusion: Paul says, “see, now is the acceptable time.” Take down those fences, recognize how large your lives are in Christ. As Paul tells us: “I’m speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!” AMEN