

“Are You Afraid”
Pastor John Bronson

John 6:16-21

February 19, 2012

Order of Worship for 2/19/12:

Pre-service Song:
Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: Missions skit

Call to Worship: Psalm 46 and Prayer

“A Mighty Fortress is Our God”

Song # 151

Offering and Offertory

Special Music:

Message: “Are you Afraid?” (John 6:16-21)
By Pastor Bronson

Songs of Worship:

“Prince of Peace”

Overhead

“Shout to the Lord”

Overhead

“You Are My All in All”

Song # 583

Parting Word of Grace

Annual Congregational Business Meeting
4:00 pm
Church Sanctuary
(Sunday Evening in the Word: 5:30 pm -7:00 pm is Cancelled)

“The Prayer Closet”

February 19, 2012

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

District and Home Office, EFCA: the National and District offices will remain zealous in the promotion and defense of Biblical truth; they will work effectively for planning and planting new churches; they will oversee and ensure the continued orthodoxy and spiritual vitality of Trinity University and Seminary

President Obama and the Supreme Court Justices: the Spirit will instill a love of the truth and a rational passion for justice and righteousness in all; they will understand the good of men according to the Word of God; they will enjoy peace and well-being in their homes

Board of Elders and the Congregation: the Spirit will bring clarity and conviction regarding the direction for the renewal and expansion of our church ministries; there will be a joyful determination to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace as we seek the Lord’s direction as His people

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: SFC Matthew Basner, Army (son of Randy and Lou): that their house in Georgia would sell; that their move to Albuquerque, New Mexico go well; that Matt’s new position teaching on Kirkland AFB go well.

Young Adult of the Week: Joshua and Lina Bronson, University of London (son and daughter-in-law of John and Nini): . that Lina’s last trimester go well and that she doesn't get sick at all during the time; that all remain healthy; that Lina is able to tie up all her work in a good way; that Josh can continue to make progress on the PhD now and especially when the little one comes along.

The title of the message is “Are You Afraid?” I ask you to think about that. Are you afraid? Are you afraid occasionally? Are you afraid continually? Is there an underlying anxiety that runs through the course of your days? Or, do you greet each morning with a fresh sense of joy and inner confidence recognizing that this is the day that God has made, He is in charge, and we are under His guiding and protecting care?

The text for today is John 6:16-21. I would like to read that section. I encourage you to turn there. This is the brief description given by John of Jesus walking on water. It is not simply that He walks on water; it is the conditions under which He walks on the water which help to highlight and emphasize the dramatic reality of what He has done.

“When evening came, His disciples went down to the sea – This is immediately after the feeding of the five thousand – got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.”

This is so brief an account you almost wonder why John stuck it in here. We are going to go and look at the accounts in both Matthew and Mark and get a little broader picture of what had actually occurred. Before we do that let me remind you that whenever we read the gospel of John there are always two levels of understanding that we want to gain. I have mentioned these before and I will mention them again. Whenever we read the Gospel of John there are two levels of understanding or two levels of instruction that are being given to us: the one is “What is it that John wants to do [in writing his gospel]? He told us at the very beginning of the Gospel. John the Gospel writer is presenting evidence throughout the entirety of the Gospel as to why you and I should understand that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God. That is his purpose at all times. But Jesus, who is of course the main player in the Gospel, has another purpose, and that purpose is this: to reveal the character of the Father. So all the time we should be asking those two questions: what am I learning about Jesus as the one Whom the Father sent, and what am I learning about the Father Who sent Jesus? Those two should dovetail beautifully, but we should be mindful that both levels of information and advocacy are being set before us.

Well, what about this episode? Turn to Matthew 14. As we turn there, let me remind you that there are two episodes in which Jesus is on the water and the storm that is troubling the waters comes to an end. One of them is when Jesus is in the boat. They’re sailing across this sea, a storm comes up and the men in the boat finally become so frightened that they go to Jesus, wake Him up, and ask Him, “Don’t You care about us?” Jesus speaks and brings the waters to calm. That is pretty dramatic. But it is not this event. In fact this event is rather more dramatic than the other one. After all if you know anything about storms, particularly on the Sea of Tiberius, they would come up very suddenly, and they would go away very suddenly. So it might be possible to have Jesus stand up and time it rightly! But on this occasion, when you read the other accounts, you realize that not only is there a storm on the Sea, but Jesus is actually walking on the water against the wind and against the waves that are being whipped up by the wind. We are told that the men are rowing in the boat against the wind and the sea. I don’t know about you, but that would scare me to death, to see this guy walking over the waters through the flying mist. I believe that is the primary reason why John has included this event. He was there. Never forget that these Gospels were written by eye-witnesses. I suspect that the memory of that man, Jesus, walking across that water amidst the howling winds and the flying waters was burned onto John’s memory as an unforgettable statement: Jesus is not an ordinary guy! Because of His “un-ordinariness” because of the extraordinary qualities that He demonstrates, fundamentally He is saying, “Listen to what I have to say, for what I have to say is from the Father.”

Matthew and Mark relate further aspects of the event which differ from each other while Luke skips over it altogether. We find Matthew’s account in 14:22-33. I will not read the entirety of the account. Matthew tells us that Jesus came walking on the water “...in the fourth watch of the night.” That is between three o’clock in the

morning and six o'clock in the morning. What that means is that the guys who left the other side of the sea at sundown have been out there rowing and pushing across that sea for hours. They are probably close to exhaustion. We do not know how long the winds had actually been contrary, but we can be sure the men are very weary. When they saw Jesus they thought He was a ghost. That is the 27th verse. This is what we are told: *“But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’”* It is here that Matthew makes his unique contribution, which is the account of Peter’s request that the Lord command him to walk out on the water. What do you think; that if you had been there on the boat you would have gone out together [with Peter]? Not me; I can tell you that right now. I would stay right in the middle of the boat! But the Lord does, he responds to Peter’s request. Peter pulls it off! Then, as we are told, Peter begins to shift his eyes from Jesus to the waves and the wind, and he grows afraid again. Jesus extends His hand and pulls him up. But He has this comment; it is a rebuke in v. 31: *“O you of little faith! Why did you doubt?”* The wind stops, and the disciples worship Jesus as the Son of God.

Looking at this there is a lesson, something for us to gain. The lesson is this: if the Lord asks us to do something, especially if you have already asked whether or not you could do it, then do it without doubt. That is the lesson: do it without doubt. Step forward. If you have been praying – as I hope and as I pray that all of you have – “Lord show me what you want me to do”, and the Lord shows you, here’s my advice: “Do it!” That is it; sum total and complete. Just do it. James’ comment is absolutely correct. You may know that you are entirely unqualified. This is probably true for most of us. But it is God’s strength and God’s wisdom that are at issue. So, do it.

There is an addendum, and this is the addendum, the add on, the corollary: be careful what you ask for! This is somewhat counter-cultural for us. It is common in my experience to say this: “Well, why don’t you just give it a try and see if it works out for you?” Did you ever hear that? [But] what is being tried, your ability or your faith? If you have counseled with the Lord and you have become persuaded that He is asking you to walk in a particular direction: walk! Where I think most of us fall short in the process is in the time of prayer and preparation before we make a decision. Far too often, I think, we want circumstances to control our behavior instead of us establishing control over circumstances. So we start and quit. That is not a wise way to live the life of faith.

Let us go to Mark. Mark’s account is given in 6:45-52. Here again we are told that Jesus sends the disciples off after the day’s labors while He takes care of dismissing the crowd of some seven thousand people and He then goes up into the mountains alone to pray. I will read a section beginning at verse 48 of chapter 6.

“And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.” Here is the sentence I want you to underline. I know that may offend you way of handling the Bible, but I want you to underline it. Why? Because it says, *“He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’ And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”*

This is not something we expect. This is something interesting to learn. He was perfectly willing to let them struggle. That is a very important thing for us to know about the God Whom we serve. Jesus is willing to let us struggle just as the disciples had to struggle against the contrary winds. This does not mean that Jesus is indifferent, or God is indifferent to what we are going through or willing to respond [to our needs]. Notice that immediately when they cry out, Jesus is there. He says, “Don’t be afraid; I am here!” There is a lesson that you are not to learn. You are not to learn this lesson: “If we just had prayed a little sooner, maybe if we had turned around and looked for Jesus and cried out for Jesus to come, we wouldn’t have had to struggle!” That is to forget the whole structure of the event in that Jesus put them on the boat and sent them; then He waited back on the shore. He knew full well what was happening out there. He saw the trouble they were in, but He intended to walk right by. The lesson certainly includes our learning that Jesus is with us through our struggles. That, by the way, is how it was when

servicing the thousands with the bread and the fish. Last week I presented the feeding of the five thousand along with however many women and children were there in a humorous manner. However, had you and I been there along with the disciples it would not have been funny at all. It would have been an “arm-pit sweaty” event, besides which it is exhausting to serve that many people. So it would have been very demanding. Yet they had seen as they sat there wondering, will there be enough, there was not only enough, but there was an overflow, there was tons of food left over. How many have been in a situation [where you wondered] whether or not your event was going to have enough food for everybody there? Then the last person leaves and look in the pot and there’s a little bit left and you say, “Whoosh, that was a close one!” I wouldn’t be surprised if when the men looked upon those extra baskets of food they wept for joy. How generous, how amazing is our God! But now they are on the water, and the night is around them and the winds are against them, and they see what they think is a ghost, and they are terrified.

We should remember that every one of the men on that boat, excepting Judas Iscariot, will end their lives amidst terrible and bitter struggles, every one of them. I do not think that we would say that they failed to learn the lesson of calling on Jesus. But they [also] learned this lesson: God is with us to the end. The lesson is not that Jesus will always take away the struggling. The lesson is that He is with us to the end. I believe that is the kind of lessons that parents teach their children. That is why, though your child weeps and wails and stomps [his or her] feet you will not do their homework lesson for them. “I am here, I am for you, and it is your job. Either you learn how to master it, or you don’t. I will love you, support you, care for you, but I will not remove the necessary struggles from your life that you might grow up and become a man or a woman who knows how to meet the challenges of life.”

Mark’s closing comment in v. 52 is puzzling. The connection with Jesus walking on the water and the ending of the storm with the loaves or the feeding of the multitude is not obvious. Perhaps our hearts are hardened too: that is what [Mark] says, they’re hearts were hardened. The connection seems to be this: if we are with Jesus, we need not be afraid, for He will provide all that is needed for us to accomplish the Father’s will. God will supply. He will supply whether by life or death, at least in physical terms. If nothing else the disciples experience of Jesus feeding somewhere between seven and eight thousand people with just a couple of loaves and a few fish should have told the disciples that He was more than capable of meeting any challenge. Feeding the crowd should have told them Jesus enjoyed the constant presence and power of the Father. If you and I are alive by faith with God the Father through the Son, it is well with us. Whether we succeed or fail at whatever it is we think we are supposed to do, it is well with us. You see, the promise of God is not that you and I will succeed at all the things we try to do. The promise of God is, “I will never leave you; I will sustain you.” The outcomes are up to Him.

All three of the accounts, John, Matthew and Mark, have one phrase that stands out. That phrase is, “Do not be afraid.” I want us to think about fear and the place that it plays in our lives. Fear plays a large role, larger I think than we generally realize or acknowledge to ourselves. Our call to worship this morning, Psalm 46, dealt with the issue of fear. “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.” I love that hymn. I love that hymn because I am a scaredy cat. It is literally true! I was a sickly and hypersensitive little boy growing up. Both of my big brothers were brutes. As a matter of fact, one of them beat me up: I know it is a sad tale!

Turn to Psalm 27. I am going to read through the Psalm and I would like you to note the fears that David offers to the Lord. I am going to move along quickly. Then I am going to go over those fears and just briefly mention them as the kind of fears that God says “I will take care of [these].”

(v. 1) *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

(v. 2) *When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.*

Source of fear: evil doers (in general), adversaries and foes (in particular)

(v. 3) *Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.* **Source of fear:** large organized opposition and general violent tumult

(v. 4) *One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and inquire in his temple.*

(v. 5) *For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.* **Source of fear:** the day of trouble

(v. 6) *And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.*

Source: surrounding enemies

(v. 7) *Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me!*

(v. 8) *You have said, ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘Your face, Lord, do I seek.’*

(v. 9) *Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!*

Source: God’s anger and absence in response to my sins, trespasses, failures?

(v. 10) *For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in.*

Source: potential parental disapproval, also death of parents

(v. 11) *Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my **enemies**.*

(v. 12) *Give me not up the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses have risen against me, and they breathe out violence.*

Source: adversaries, not necessarily an enemy, a competitor

(v. 13) *I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!*

(v. 14) *Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!*

Sources of fear in Psalm 27: (printed at the end of the text)

1. evil doers (in general), adversaries and foes (in particular)
2. organized opposition and general violence and tumult
3. the day of trouble = tent for stormy weather and a high rock for floods
4. surrounding enemies
5. God’s anger and absence in response to my sins, trespasses, failures
6. potential parental disapproval or death
7. adversaries, not necessarily an enemy, just a competitor

In most places today it is foolish not to lock your doors. It is foolish in most places today to walk alone at night. It wasn’t, by the way, when I was a kid. Times have changed. It is foolish to leave anything of value unattended. We worry about that in our parking lot. We do not want you to leave valuable items sitting on the... Why do we want you not to do that? Because there are evil doers around. We know that; we know that it is true. What are evil doers? Evil doers are people without moral character. Know somebody like that? Evil doers are people without moral character. They don’t have anything against you in particular. They will take advantage of anybody, anybody at all. This is in contrast to adversaries. We might identify with this. An adversary is someone who has targeted you in particular. In a church I served before it finally came to light that there was a gentleman in that congregation who had targeted me in particular and he was out to get rid of me as the pastor. My head deacon, who at one time I thought was a godly man, said that I had to go and talk to [the gentleman] personally. At that moment I knew that he wasn’t a godly man: he just delivered cruel and unusual punishment! It worked however. I went and spoke directly to the man who was trying to get rid of me, and he left the church: yes!

There are consequences to living in a world in which you know there are evil doers, people of low moral character who will use you or anybody else for personal advantage, or people who are directly targeting you because you are

in their way. What happens when we realize that there are these kinds of people around? We grow anxious. [David] says, “. . .they eat up my flesh.” Guarding against such people, either evil doers in general or adversaries in particular, is wearing; it runs us down. Not only that, but when we let these kind of people dominate the horizon of our thought, gradually we learn to live fearfully rather than faithfully, we are looking all the time at the trouble coming at us and we are not looking at the strength that is available to us. So we live fearfully rather than faithfully. Then, of course, as we allow these negative realities to dominate our thinking, the light of God’s grace dims, and we then live in an increasingly darkened world. It is in response to this kind of reality that God says, “I am with you, do not be afraid.”

If you drop down to the third verse, David refers to armies and war. In the context of David this would have referred either to Saul and his armies or perhaps the armies of David’s [son’s] and civil war, or perhaps Absalom later on, or the armies of the surrounding kingdoms. David was continually involved in violent warfare and had every reason therefore in that sense to be afraid. But far greater tumult arises when you have civil war that when you have war from the outside. War from the outside tends to make you circle the wagons, you gather together your forces, you lean on one another when you have a common enemy. But what happens when factions divide the one house? The most terrible war in America’s history was the Civil War: the most bloody, the most mortal and the longest wounds in the soul of the nation. We are at war today. You and I should know that. We as a nation are no longer united. We do not share a consensus. We feel the threat of tumult. Confusion, agitation, disturbance, great emotional disturbance, agitation of mind or feelings is tumult. Our nation no longer enjoys an unspoken agreement as to our basic values and perspective on what is good, on what is evil, on what is right, on what is wrong, on what honors the dignity of our humanity or what degrades our humanity. We no longer agree. What are the consequences of fear? They are serious. The danger under this condition is that we allow ourselves to experience a deepening social alienation and even despair regarding our own cultural institutions and our nation as a whole. We sense ourselves being cut off from society. If we give in to this, we will cease to love our neighbor. [But] what Paul tells us is that you and I can do no good at all unless we do it through love.

When I first came [to Oroville], one of the things that I noticed with disappointment was how many spoke about Oroville. Beloved, we either love this city or we should leave. If we desire that God would bless this city, we must love it. In order for you and I to love it, we must be persuaded that God has put us in the boat, and He has asked us to row across the waters, and on the far side of the sea is a community that has come again to know and to understand the love and the truth and the righteousness and the justice of God. That needs to be the fire that burns in our hearts; that needs to be the desire that governs us at all times. No matter how great the opposition nor how deep its incomprehension that these are necessary for its well-being; you and I know the truth and you and I need to bring that truth to bear upon the city and all of its institutions and citizens and you and I can only do that if we are confident that God is with us and He intends to love this city through us. We cannot be afraid. We must be strong. That is a choice that you and I are able to make.

Please pray with me: our heavenly Father, the truth of the matter is, as each of us in this room knows, we are weak, fragile, easily broken, easily discouraged, easily persuaded that we are inadequate to meet the challenge. Father, all of those are true as long as we stand on our own. So teach us the wisdom and the truth that is here in this brief statement of Jesus walking on the water. Indeed, Father, You will let us struggle, and in the struggle we both are humbled and made strong, because we know You are there and You will not let us sink beneath the waters. In Jesus’ name. Amen

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. How have you determined that as the Lord told Peter to walk on the water, He has called, directed or led you to take up a project, ministry or work?
2. Do you think the Lord has ever knowingly put you into a situation where you would have to struggle to remain on task and faithful? Does this seem like an unloving thing to do?
3. Which seems more important to you, being faithful without having to struggle, or being able to endure faithfully to the end even though struggling?
4. Are you often fearful? Does it seem to you that fear is a serious factor in people’s lives?
5. Sources of fear in Psalm 27:
 1. evil doers (in general), adversaries and foes (in particular)
 2. large organized opposition and general violent tumult
 3. the “day of trouble” (a day of future “judgment”), of impending doom
 4. surrounding enemies, overwhelming opposition
 5. God’s anger and absence in response to my sins, trespasses, failures?
 6. potential parental disapproval, or the death of parents
 7. abandoned to your adversaries’ will, loss of personal control over your circumstances or future
6. Do any of these “fears” resonate in your experience? Have any of them interfered with our compromised your ability to serve others for the Lord?
7. Do you think it possible or likely that the Lord wants you to face and overcome any of these fears?
8. What would help or enable you to better trust in Jesus and overcome the fear?