

Title: I Quit Living Scared
Text: Matthew 8:23-27
Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron
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We are all a strange mix of fears and phobias. Some we conquer; others still conquer us.

Some of us have more phobias than others:

For example, Woody Allen is afraid of insects, sunshine, dogs, deer, bright colors, children, heights, small rooms, crowds, and cancer.

Famous people of the past were no different.

George Washington was scared to death of being buried alive.

Richard Nixon was terrified of hospitals, and Napoleon Bonaparte, the military and political genius, was afraid of cats.

There are at least 500 medically documented fears that human beings suffer from. We know the obvious ones – heights, flying, snakes. But some of us are incredibly creative when it comes to our fears. For example, documented fears include:

Peladophobia: fear of bald people

Geniophobia: fear of chins

Aulophobia: fear of flutes

Entheraphobia: fear of mother-in-law

Then there are the uniquely 21st century fears. For example – FOMO. Do you know what FOMO is social media shorthand for? Fear Of Missing Out. In The New York Times Jenna Wortham wrote about a friend who works in advertising who told her that she felt fine about her life—until she opened Facebook. The friend said:

Then I'm thinking, I am 28, with three roommates, and, oh, it looks like they have a precious baby and a mortgage. And then I [wanted to] die.

Fear stalks us, consumes us, distracts us, paralyzes us and robs us of joy. And often we seem powerless to overcome it, no matter where our fear comes from or how it is expressed.

Last December Scott Stossel published an incredibly brave long essay in The Atlantic magazine, which he edits, titled 'Surviving Anxiety'. In the article he admitted to living life that he is a twitchy bundle of phobias, fears and neuroses. He says:

Even when not actively afflicted by acute episodes [of anxiety], I am buffeted by worry.

He goes on to describe what he has tried to deal with his anxiety:

Individual psychotherapy (three decades of it), family therapy, group therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy.

Hypnosis, meditation, role-playing, interoceptive exposure therapy, in vivo exposure therapy, self-help workbooks, massage therapy, prayer, acupuncture, yoga, Stoic philosophy, and audiotapes I ordered off a late-night TV infomercial.

And medication. Lots of medication. Thorazine. Imipramine. Desipramine. Chlorpheniramine. Nardil. BuSpar. Prozac. Zoloft. Paxil. Wellbutrin. Effexor. Celexa. Lexapro. Cymbalta. Luvox. Trazodone. Levoxyl. Inderal. Tranxene. Serax. Centrax. St. John's wort. Zolpidem. Valium. Librium. Ativan. Xanax. Klonopin.

Also: beer, wine, gin, bourbon, vodka, and scotch.

Here's what's worked: nothing.

Fear is consuming.

You may relate to something one author has written:

Trying to break away from my worries was like wrestling an octopus.
(Fred Smith)

In his book *Fearless*, Max Lucado makes the observation that a frightened animal that finds itself cornered will often bare their teeth and growl and snarl as a means of defense. In many ways, people in the grip of fear do the same thing

Martin Niemöller was a German pastor who took a heroic stand against Adolf Hitler. When he first met the dictator in 1933, Niemöller stood at the back of the room and listened. Later, when his wife asked him what he'd learned, he said:

I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man.

People in the grip of fear will often snarl and growl and bite. Fear releases the tyrant within.

Fear is consuming, releases the tyrant within and, in the end, fear is a deadly toxin – fear is a life destroyer.

We have all heard and used the phrase, 'I was scared to death.' I was thinking about that phrase this week and wondered whether there was any truth to that statement; could a person be literally scared to death? Reading an article from 2009 in the *Scientific American*, the answer is an unequivocal 'yes', you can be scared to death. Neurologists recognize that when a person feels threatened or frightened, it triggers a fight or flight response in us that releases sudden doses of adrenaline to be released, increasing our heart rate. In large amount, adrenaline is toxic to the heart, and if the dose is large enough, can cause sudden death in certain circumstances. In the week after the 9/11 attacks in New York, there was a large increase in sudden cardiac arrests. Living in fear of another attack, some New Yorkers were literally scared to death.

For some of us here this morning, fear is consuming us from the inside out, leaving us anxious and worried.

For others, fear is releasing the tyrant within, turning us into an unlikable mixture of bared fangs and angry growls.

Others still are experiencing fear as a life destroying presence, robbing us of joy.

The pervasive presence of fear in our lives means that many of us are living scared. But God both calls and enables us to quit living scared. The question is how. To discover the answer, we are going to explore a Jesus' story from Matthew's gospel. Immediately before this, Jesus has been amazing crowds with the depth and insight of his teaching, and astonishing everyone as he heals the sick and casts out demons:

(Jesus) 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!"

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!"
(Matthew 8:23-27)

Three weeks ago I told a story of another storm the disciples encountered while on the lake, where first Jesus and then Peter walk on water. In terms of its intensity, the storm described in the passage we have just read is another one altogether. Matthew describes it as furious. The Greek word translated is *seismos* – which literally translated is earthquake. I will come back in a moment to the significance of Matthew's description in a little while.

This was deadly storm of earthquake intensity – cyclonic. Waves were sweeping over the boat. In Mark’s telling of the story, the boat was filling up fast with water. The situation was desperate.

While all this is going on, Jesus sleeps – he sleeps! Fear overwhelming as surely as the waves, the disciples wake him up, upon which Jesus rebukes the wind and waves and miraculous calm is restored.

Let’s step back for a moment and assess what’s going on. A helpful way of interpreting the bible is to ask three questions, one of which builds on the other:

- What is being communicated to the characters in the story?
- What is being communicated to those who first heard/read the story?
- What is being communicated to us?

Regarding the first question, the characters in the story, the disciples stand back amazed at Jesus’ power over the wind and the waves. Good Jewish boys that they were, they would have known what the Psalmist said of God:

- Who is like you, LORD God Almighty?
- You, LORD, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you.
- You rule over the surging sea;
- when its waves mount up, you still them.
- (Psalm 89:8-9)

For Peter, James and John and the others, the implication is clear; at the very least Jesus is close to God, like God perhaps – or, almost unbelievably, Jesus is God in human form. They are still not sure. What they were learning was this; in the presence of Jesus they need not fear.

So what is being communicated to those who first heard or read Matthew’s story? One of the earliest symbols of the church was a boat on a stormy sea. For early Christians, the boat represented the small community of the church, often threatened by the storms of persecution and suffering. Scholars believe Matthew’s original audience was the Christian community in and around Palestine, where the church was made up mostly of Jewish Christians. When Matthew wrote, persecution against Christians was on the rise, rippling out from Rome. The relationship between the Christians and Jews was strained at best. All this is to say, Matthew was writing to people who were encountering storms of such magnitude that wave after wave was threatening to swamp them. What they would have heard in this story was this; in the presence of Jesus they need not fear.

Last, what is being communicated to us – almost 2000 years after these events? Like the first century church, our church, Newlife Uniting Church, has over its 20 year history faced storms. We will encounter more. At those times fear can overwhelm us.

Individually we face storms; medical storms where an uncertain prognosis anxiously grips us. Financial storms, relationship storms – and the ferocity of the wind and waves can overwhelm us with fear. We ask ourselves whether we will survive. What we can hear in this story is this; in the presence of Jesus we need not fear.

But there’s more to this story. It asks a question of us. More particularly, Jesus asks a question of us, as he did of the disciples cowering in the boat.

You of little faith, why are you so afraid?

In the Presence of Jesus we have nothing, not anything to fear, because in the presence of Jesus we will:

- Know a transforming Fear of God
- Experience the perfect Love of God
- Live in the overcoming Power of God

Know a Transforming Fear of God

Mark finishes the same story Matthew recounts, but with some extra details. After Jesus calms the storm, Mark says this:

(The disciples) were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him."
(Mark 4:41)

Matthew says they were amazed, Mark that they were terrified. The disciples were terrified at the power Jesus had demonstrated, which is not the same as a healthy fear of God, but hints at it.

It sounds counterintuitive; that when we know a transforming Fear of God we will as a result fear less and less every and anything else.

Who we see and understand God to be is critical.

Yesterday our cat Romeo brought home a present. He proudly presented to us an injured little water dragon lizard. He placed it on our tiles. We thought it was dead, until it moved slightly, upon which Romeo swiped it with his paw. The water dragon was terrified; we were horrified. Some of us may have viewed our relationship with God a little like Rome and that terrified water dragon. We might view God as some sort of cosmic tyrant who treats us as his playthings, swatting us every now and then with some suffering here, some pain there.

A healthy fear of God is not running terrified from a cosmic tyrant.

There is another extreme, where God is not a cosmic tyrant, but our cosmic buddy – a divine butler if you like – who is obligated to provide us with our every need, at our beck and call.

But God is not our cosmic buddy, nor is he a cosmic tyrant; God is a Cosmic King.

In fact the God of the bible – the only God – is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. To Fear God is to fall to our knees and recognise this fact. One theologian puts it this way:

(The Fear of the Lord) is the convergence of awe, reverence, adoration, honor, worship, confidence, thankfulness, love, and, yes, fear.
(Robert Strimple)

To Fear God is to recognise that God is wholly other – separate to and over and above his creation, the maker of all that is seen and unseen.

To Fear God is to accept the truth that there is a gap of infinite proportions between the Creator and us - his creation.

To Fear God is to know and live in the reality that God is omnipotent (All powerful), Omniscient (All seeing and knowing) and omnipresent (Everywhere Present).

Perhaps the most vivid example of a healthy and transforming Fear of God is reflected in the story of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Confronted with a vision of God in all God's glory and splendour, Isaiah falls to his knees with the cry, 'Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I love among a people of unclean lips.'

When we truly fear God, it completely reorientates our life and puts all of our anxieties and worries in a new perspective. We recognise that the God we worship is always and in all ways sovereign over our circumstances. When the disciples recognised Jesus' power over the storm, they were struck with terrified awe. This was no ordinary man.

The great missionary Oswald Chambers put it this way:

The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.
(Oswald Chambers)

The first step to forever conquering our fears is to fear God. In so doing we recognise that the God we honour with reverent awe is sovereign over all of our circumstances. This is why the discipline of regular worship is so important.

When I turn up to church each week, whether I like it or not, or want to or not, I am reminding myself that God is God and I am not.

When I sing songs of adoration and praise I reorientate my life around the inconvenient truth that God sits on the throne, not me.

When I sit under God's word read and preached, I remember that I am not the Lord of my life, Jesus – God's living word – is.

When I worship with reverent awe, I loosen my grip on the fears, anxieties and worries that otherwise afflict me.

I come away with my heart singing the refrain, 'It is well with my soul.'

Billy Graham's wife, who lived with a lot of stress, including rebellious kids, said this:

I [have] learned that worship and worry cannot live in the same heart: they are mutually exclusive.
(Ruth Bell Graham)

In the Presence of Jesus we:

Experience the Perfect Love of God

One of my favourite verses in the bible is found in the first letter of John:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.
(1 John 4:18)

John is talking about the fear we live with as a direct result of our sin, whether we recognise that fear or not. Our sin separates us from God, and leaves in its wake a heart-deep fear – of being caught, being punished, being forever separated from God. We try to ignore it, deny it and self-medicate it. The shadow of fear that falls across our life manifests in forever restless hearts. But God's perfect love casts out all fear. How?

Remember earlier the storm that Matthew describes as an earthquake – seismos? He uses that word three other times in his gospel. He uses it to describe the tumultuous events that will mark the end of time as we know it. Then there is this at the very moment Jesus is crucified:

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"
(Matthew 27:54)

At the very moment Jesus dies, a seismos – earthquake – occurs. Jesus calms a seismos like storm on the lake with a rebuke, destroying the storm's power. On the cross, God expresses his perfect love for us as Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us. Bearing our sin on his shoulders, in his crucifixion, Jesus defeats sin and destroys its power over us. The earthquake – seismos – is the earth announcing our liberation – a victory cry! In the cross, God's perfect love forever bridges the gap between us and God.

No longer do we need to fear the shadow of our past.

No longer do we need to fear God's wrath.

No longer do we need to fear punishment or estrangement from God.

Because of God demonstrated his perfect love for us through the crucifixion of Jesus, we have a simple choice.

We can live in the dark shadow of fear cast by our past.

Or by placing our faith and trust in him, we can live in the shadow and shelter of God's wing.

In the Presence of Jesus we know a transforming Fear of God and experience the perfect love of God. We also:

Live in the overcoming Power of God

There is one more seismos – earthquake –in Matthew's gospel. After Jesus' burial, the women went to his tomb to keep vigil. This is what happened when they arrived:

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.
(Matthew 28:2)

Jesus death was marked by an earthquake, signifying that in his crucifixion he has conquered sin.

His resurrection is likewise accompanied by an earthquake, announcing that in coming to life, Jesus has conquered death.

This resurrection power is the inheritance of all those who place their faith and trust in Jesus. In Romans Paul remind all Christians of the astonishing fact that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us. In light of this reality, he says:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
(Romans 8:35 and 37)

All the things that we could and should fear – all the storms of life – the things that we would otherwise worry about and be anxious over no longer any power over us. They no longer have any power over us only because the power of Jesus' resurrection – the Spirit of God – lives in us. Our eternal future an destiny is secure in the resurrection power of Jesus.

In the presence of Jesus we encounter a transforming fear of God, experience the perfect love of God and live in the overcoming power of God.

In Jesus:

God has covered my past, inhabits my present and holds my future: I need not fear.

So let me pose Jesus question to you again:

Why are you afraid?

By placing your faith and trust in Jesus you can quit living scared, all because Jesus has power and authority over all we fear.

Back in 2004, David Page was doing some digging on a work site in England when he uncovered a lump of corroded metal. Curious he picked it up and was horrified to identify it as unexploded WW2 bomb. Afraid to put it down in case it detonated, he carried it to a phone and rang the police. He even used the call to issue his last words for his family. "The woman police operator kept saying it would be okay," said Page, "but I kept saying to her, 'You're not the one holding the bomb.'"

For four hours he held the cylinder, waiting for rescue or an immediate death.

First responders rushed to the work-yard, and finally army bomb disposal experts finally arrived. But the drama came to an abrupt end when the "bomb" was identified. It was part of the hydraulic suspension system from a Citroen, a popular European car. It was no bomb. For four hours he clutched to something that had no power.