

A friend of mine recently had a job interview. She's been doing her best since the pandemic began, as have all of us, but she's not able to work her job during the pandemic, as it requires in-person instruction. She's applied for a few different positions over these past months, and finally was able to schedule an interview for a communications position in a church. Thank God for churches, right?

On the day of the interview, she had some other things to take care of, running errands and tending her home and dog before the interview in the afternoon. She went about her usual things, and didn't realize just how nervous she was about this job interview until the day actually came. She shared with me how tense and anxious she felt in her body, even just doing the simple things, like going grocery shopping. But as she was on her way home from the store, she saw a new sign on the billboard she passes all the time, and that billboard, unbelievably, now read, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," which is the hugely comforting Bible verse Philippians 4:13. She saw that literal sign and took a deep breath, it started to calm some of the waves brewing up with her anxiety. As she continued driving home, an old, happy little song called "Fireflies" came on the radio - that song was played so very often on repeat in an earlier, challenging season of her life, and brought a little spark of joy each time. She was reminded of those sparks of joy and comforted. And on her way to the actual interview later on in the day, she looked at the truck stopped in front of her at a stoplight, and what did the license plate say? "Firefly."

She took these reminders of happy, beloved, and more stable parts of life as signs, that God was with her even in the midst of her fear and anxiety surrounding the job interview. She's been fearful, like so many of us, of so many things that have seemed certain before this pandemic. Fear of being ill. Fear of making someone else sick. Fear of what the early market crashes would do financially, fearful of how she and her husband would be able to continue their jobs. Fear she may not see family that lives far away for quite a long time. And all that fear gets bound up in her body, in all of our bodies, that needs to get released somehow.

She had fear going into this new job interview of what could be in this whole new chapter for her. We all are entering new chapters that can understandably fill us with fear. We often feel like the boat in today's gospel story, far away from known land, battered by the waves, the wind against us, just trying to keep it together and afloat while the storms rage around us. It's okay to be fearful. But we need not let that fear consume us. Because Jesus is greater than any storm, any wave or fearful thing that threatens us. Jesus speaks peace, to us, in the middle of the storms. Do not be afraid.

I wonder sometimes, where fear comes from. It's such a powerful and common experience, but often doesn't really serve us. Usually fear holds us back from faith in what's possible. Somewhere deep inside us, fear is meant to protect us, or we think it will protect us. It will keep the status quo, what is familiar, to us because that's what we know, and can therefore control.

Oftentimes fear arises from what is unknown, there's a skepticism to what is new because we've not had to deal with it before. And if we've not had to deal with it before, then it's harder for use to feel like we are in control, and that leads to a powerful fear and anxiety.

But we learn how to cope with fear and anxiety from both Peter and Jesus in this powerful Gospel story. Peter was deeply afraid and skeptical in the midst of the storm. When we have these difficult feelings, like Peter, we often beat ourselves up or try to push away our real feelings, or the real feelings of others, because we can't cope with the fear on our own. We have limitations in this realm. But when Jesus sees Peter's fear, He does not say "ignore the storm", or "you're being ridiculous" or "Peter, you've overreacting, come on now, calm down." Jesus knows this storm is a big deal! The very lives of his disciples, his dear friends who he loves, were at risk in the midst of this situation.

Instead, Jesus meets Peter where he is, and answers his fear with an invitation to come closer to Him. Jesus acknowledges that the fear exists and He follows through on Peter's request to see that Jesus is really walking on the water. Jesus knows the deep hurt that happens through human life. Fear and grief and betrayal and pain all the way to the cross, to death, and back again, Jesus knows how hard it is to cope with these huge human feelings.

And so we learn from Peter and Jesus to not ignore our fears, not to belittle the storms that we find ourselves caught up in. But we don't need to dwell in those fears either, the storm is not the end game. Having faith that Jesus does and will show up in the storm is what does help us through it. Trusting in Christ's ability to be there for us even when it seems impossible, when it's beyond our comprehension, this is what grants us peace in the midst of the storm.

Jesus speaks to us still today. We learn in the Gospel of John that we cannot go with Jesus to the house of God His Father, but here in the world Jesus gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, who comes alongside us and journeys with us, through the calm and the storm. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, is very much with us in the world and is the way by which we hear Jesus speak to us and call to us. Many of us have stories like my friend's, where you knew God showed up with and for you in your moments of fear, anxiety, feeling out of control, or newness. And we are absolutely blessed with that assurance, when we are able to physically see and hear and experience Jesus in our world today.

Sometimes Jesus speaks to us in ways that we do not expect, that are new or unfamiliar to us. Oftentimes when we are in fear, it is because something new is in front of us and we aren't sure what to do. When we recognize that Jesus doesn't show up in the way we always expect, it can lead to us doubting or losing faith that God is truly with us, that Jesus is with us. What a gift that Jesus shows up for us in ways we do not expect, or even in ways

we never dreamed possible. If we always knew how God was going to show up for us, it would put limitations on God's ability to act and create and show up in our world. God is so much greater than any human imagining, any construct or limitation that we could think up. The one true thing in which can have faith, is that God will always be with us. God will always love us. No matter what storms or fears or anxieties or straight up terror comes over you, God is with you. God will show up in the middle of the storm and say, "do not be afraid." When we are in the midst of fear and we cry out, "Lord, save me!", Jesus will reach out, catch us, and speak to us with confidence. We must have courage to faithfully lean on Jesus' presence in the midst of our storms. No storm can break our inmost calm, while in Jesus we have faith.

It can be easy to doubt when our fears and anxieties feel like they are threatening to drown us. But dear friends, there are always sparks of joy to be found even in the midst of what is unbelievably dark and challenging. There is always hope to be found and faith to be had in God through the Holy Spirit, the Advocate of God who walks alongside us in all things. There will always be our Savior Jesus, who will walk on the water and through the storm just to reach us, catch us, and say, "do not be afraid." The winds will eventually cease, and through the journey of it all, Jesus, God with us, leads the way for us to follow. Thanks be to God, Amen.