Nothing to Fear

February 8 and 9, 2025

Fifth Week of Epiphany

Rev. Christine E. Burns

*Jesus said to Simon, “There is nothing to fear.*

*From now on you’ll be fishing for men and women.”*

*They pulled their boats up on the beach, left them, nets and all, and followed him.*

Luke 5:10-11

On an evening in late January 2007, my brother Tim called me on the house phone. I didn’t have a cell at the time and my brother has never been one to pick up the phone for a quick chat. Tim and I are very close, due to the tragedies we had endured together as young adults.

There was a shakiness in his voice that I had never heard before. He told me to come home. And to come immediately.

I was afraid. I didn’t want to book a ticket back to Colorado to sit at my mother’s bedside and watch her die. I had never attended anyone’s death, much less my mother’s death. But I listened. I listened to Reed who asked me to think about what I would feel like if I didn’t go and wished I had after she passed. There are no do-overs at the end of life. I listened to my friend Deb who had coached me on how to get my mom into hospice a few weeks earlier and how to accept the many aspects of dying and grief. And I listened to my gut. I knew, I was afraid. And I could face that fear and so the next day I dropped Lydia who was three years old off at preschool at West Parish Family School, got some love and support from the teachers that they could take care of the baby, and she would be fine. I could go, and the children would be fine. The teachers had my back and Reed would make suppers, pack lunches, put kids on school buses and work.

When I reached my home, Tim answered the door, and I experienced a silence that had never descended upon my home before. The forced hot air felt dry and claustrophobic. Tim collapsed into my arms and said, “I am so glad you are here. I’m frightened and I don’t like being alone here.”

Tim had been meditating on the couch cushions in the center of the living room. The front curtains were drawn and the house felt like it could strangle us up. I walked back to my mother’s room and looked at her wan face and cracked lips and wept. I sat down beside her and put lip balm on her mouth and listened to Tim. And her breathing.

Once I was at her side, I wasn’t afraid anymore. I knew what to do as easily as breathing air. My primal instinct to love and deliver her to the next life kicked in and I could take over from my brother. And so, the journey at the end began.

The truth is our lives our made up of a million stories. I invite you to focus on a time in your life where everything changed. Try to think about as many of the details of that moment as possible. Perhaps you will write them down for a memoir or try your luck at appearing on the Moth radio hour. Maybe you have a story that needs to be heard from the pulpit or at a gathering of friends, whatever it is, begin with that moment and as you work out what that moment was about ask yourself, how did that event change you forever? What decision did you make that was an actual fork in the road? With that decision, you and those around you were changed forever.

In today’s scripture lesson from the Gospel according to Luke, early in his ministry Jesus shows up at the Lake Gennesaret, and there are many people crowding in to hear his words. Jesus notices that there are two boats tied together on the lake, and he climbs on board to use the boat as a pulpit so he can teach the crowds from a higher platform.

After his public sermon, Jesus turns to the man called Simon and invites him to, “Push out into deep water and let your nets out for a catch.” I love that Simon is unafraid to question him, even as he calls him Master. After all, he is a professional fisherman, and he knows the ways of the fish and the currents. Nevertheless, he is willing to give it a try and so he casts out his nets again. This time they receive a huge haul of fish, more than they can use or sell in a day. In fact, there were so many fish that the boats began to take on water and began to sink under the weight of the haul.

Simon Peter confesses his love and willingness to follow Jesus as does James and John.

But the most important line in today’s lesson comes at the end where Jesus says to Simon, “**There is nothing to fear. From now on you’ll be fishing for men and women.”** (Luke 5:10)

What would it mean to each of us if we heard, there is nothing to fear? I know that for me, fear is a big driver in my life. I think about what will become of us as a nation, what will become of my life, my children and grandchildren’s lives. I fear for the future of democracy.

And yet, this is what I know. I know this even as I fear, God is the one who is in charge. God is better. God is greater. Jesus said there is nothing to fear. That doesn’t mean that there aren’t dangers out there. That does not mean that evil does not exist. That does not mean that we may even be safe from harm.

This month we have been listening and learning about Black history and the Black church, composers, musicians and the Black Experience, especially in the United States of America. Today, John Murelle sang “Come Sunday” written by jazz musician Duke Ellington and recorded first in 1943. The lyrics remind us that Sunday, that day of rest traditionally for Black people, where their spirits were lifted in song, preaching and community in church, was a way to make it through the hard times of Monday through Saturday. As the song goes,

“Lord, dear Lord I've loved, God almighty  
God of love, please look down and see my people through

I believe that sun and moon up in the sky  
When the day is gray  
I know it, clouds passing by

He'll give peace and comfort  
To every troubled mind  
Come Sunday, oh come Sunday  
That's the day”[[1]](#footnote-1)

I love that the lyrics begin with Black folks, but they don’t end there. For the refrain says, “*He’ll give peace and comfort to every troubled mind*.” God’s going to hold all of us. We may have to wait for Sunday, it may not happen yet, but we will get there in the by and by. One day, all people, all races, all nationalities, all sexual identities, all bodies abled and disabled, all folks, young and old will be held and made whole. All of creation, including the animals, and the land, and the sea created in the book of Genesis and still living and dying on this planet God created, all will be held in God’s hand. This is the song we sing to our children, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hand.” It is God, the one who created us who can see us through.

I know that it feels like we are living in hard times right now. And it is a particularly precarious time in our nation. I draw strength from the music and history of our Black brothers and sisters in this time.

When I shared the story of what I was most afraid of as the opener for today’s message, my mother’s dying, I drew on my own experience of fear.

Black spirituals and the Black church have a lot to say about fear of dying. Black folks more often say “passed,” “passed over,” “homecoming,” and a “sunset service.” Even as a clergy person, I have only ever used “passed” as an expression for the transition of a life-to-life eternal. This terminology reminds us that in the Black tradition, even death does not have the final word. God does! God wins. Love wins. And Life, life eternal wins. It is Jesus who teaches us not to be afraid.

In the beauty and the poetry of African American spirituals, we learn that God will “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” coming for to carry us home. We learn to “Wade in the Water” so the white slave owners and the dogs can’t smell the scent of enslaved folks risking their lives to head North to freedom following the stars and traveling at night.

Black folks have been singing of wings and freedom, even after death for a long, long time. When we sing these Black spirituals which are both poetry and resistance we gain strength for the journey, allow the imagination and joy to sing out from our mouths and dance to enter our bodies.

How shall we be free? What will courage look like for each of us? What does love and liberation mean for us if we are to follow Christ? Jesus told us to drop everything. Drop our nets. Drop the abundance we have been given from the gifts of the lake in fishes. Drop our families. Drop our fear. And come follow him. With Jesus as our Master and our Friend, and with God who is the Name above all Names, we can fly away. We can move mountains. We can even face death.

And when my mom was drawing her final breaths, I sat beside her with the old red Pilgrim hymnal open across my lap and sang her favorite songs, with the window wide open and the sun pouring in as the frigid Colorado winter chill poured in and she flew away.

Amen.

1. <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Come+sunday+duke+ellington&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#wptab=si:APYL9btOMaxI48tKjOYdlPW3RyBplN8gAQzBdTKkB2IKbJ7kM9T8RmW6e56f40nA_2X21d_q2DS9lPnuNdPjeWYOf9f4IsBY7UDMeQ73F30MHUJjgMtiigAVHHepLT2-9PEAAHWrqOTz2j_2txTFDAvYNhRzugeTNQ%3D%3D> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)