

FEAR, UNCERTAINTY, AND DOUBT

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 14:22-33

As you know, over the summer, I ran for political office. I was seeking a seat on the Davidson County Metro Council. The election was a little over a week ago and it did not go in my favor. A lot of people have asked me why I was running, why did I want to serve on Council. Part of the answer is that I have always had an interest in politics and public policy. I wanted to represent my community.

What I didn't talk about as much is the theological grounds of my entering this race. Theologically, I wanted to explore the intersection of faith and politics. I wanted to learn if it is possible to represent a community in political office in a way that is authentic to the gospel message. Can a public servant serve Main Street and the Kingdom simultaneously?

Well, I won't know, will I, because I wasn't elected. But I certainly learned a lot in the process of campaigning. I feel like Cleopas who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus. It was the day of Jesus' resurrection, but Cleopas didn't know that, and at dinner, as Jesus lifted the bread and blessed and broke it, Cleopas' eyes were opened, and he recognized who Jesus was. Although he had been traveling with Jesus all day, it wasn't until this seminal event that he was able to comprehend the reality that was in front of him—that Jesus was not dead. In the same way, my efforts to get elected, a lot that I didn't understand before has become clear to me now.

Now, I will be the first to admit that when it comes to the public arena, I am naive. Why? Because I have lived my entire life within the church. I grew up in the church, went to school for the church, and, except for odd summer jobs, have only worked within the church. So, I wasn't fully prepared for what I would find on the campaign trail knocking on doors, talking to strangers.

My plan, when I first considered running, was to collect stories and weave them into my sermons here—to bring the campaign experience back to you. But I didn't do this because there weren't any edifying stories to share. However, with the election behind me, I've begun to process the experience and am beginning to recognize some patterns.

As I look back, I believe that what shocked me most was the disconnect I discovered between my community of faith and the public arena. As I have come to realize, I was naive in that I approached this campaign with the desire to address the public good. I didn't use Kingdom language specifically, but that is what I meant. Is it possible, as a public servant, to work for the advancement of the Kingdom of God? I'm not talking about making every person a devoted Christian.

No. What I mean is this—is it possible, in serving the public, to make each person aware of God’s love by serving with justice and compassion?

I approached the campaign expecting to engage in discussions on how to better the lives of all people. The slogan I created for my campaign was “A great city is great for everybody.” And I believed it. But what I encountered over the summer was mostly anger and fear and self-interest.

I can’t tell you how many times when I was knocking on doors, after I introduced myself and explained what I was doing that the person at the door launched into an angry tirade about what was wrong with their neighborhood or city or state or even the nation. And this was never in the tone of can we fix this issue for the good of all. Now, this wasn’t everybody, but it was enough to be statistically significant. Too many people that I spoke with had only their self-interest in mind. They wanted to know, in no uncertain terms, what I would do address their complaints, what I would do to improve their lives.

Now, to be fair, some people did have legitimate concerns. One homeowner pointed out a city stormwater line that ran through the back of his property. Occasionally, it would back up and flood his basement. He wanted something done about that.

But I encountered so many people who were eaten up with this raw anger—a corrosive anger clearly rooted in fear—a fear of changes in society, a fear that someone was stealing from them, a fear of those elected to office.

Our scripture reading for today is about fear. This is the story of Jesus walking on water (and Peter failing to do so). Immediately before this story, Jesus has just fed 5000 people with only a little bit of fish and bread. At the end of the day, as Jesus dismisses the crowds, he sends his disciples to get into a boat and go ahead of him up the lake. Presumably, he will meet them later. Jesus then takes the time to be alone and he heads up a hill to rest and to pray.

During the night, as the disciples sailed on the lake, a storm arose and pushed them away from their destination. We read that the boat was *battered* by the waves. It was a bad storm. But we don't read that the disciples were afraid because of the storm. After all, most of them were fishermen. They were used to this. The storm was concerning, but they had the skills and experience to deal with it. What scared them was something else.

All night they fight the storm and then very early in the morning, well before dawn, Jesus comes towards them. He’s not in a boat himself but walking across the water. He is walking across the water just as God moved over the waters of chaos at creation. And while the disciples have taken this storm in stride, the sight of

someone walking on the water terrifies them. Their brains cannot make sense of what they are seeing.

So, they cry out, *It is a ghost*. They don't know what else it could be, but they are terrified, and ghost is the only explanation that makes sense. But it's not a ghost. It is Jesus. And he calls out to them saying, *Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid*.

But how could they not be afraid? There are many times that I've been out on a boat at night. Even in the best of conditions, it can be unsettling. It is dark. You are surrounded by endless water. All you can see are the stars and the moon and their reflections off the water. If you let your imagination run loose, you begin to worry about the unseen monsters of the deep that circle beneath you.

If I was out on a boat at night (or even at high noon) and I spotted someone walking across the water toward me, even if it was someone I knew, I would be scared out of my wits. I would be filled with fear.

Despite his fear, Peter who responds. Peter says, *Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water*. This is a test because Peter says, *Lord, if it is you...* He's not convinced. But Jesus says simply, *Come*, and Peter obeys and steps out of the boat and starts walking across the water. He takes several steps until he becomes aware of the wind and the waves and the reality of this situation and fear grabs hold of him. And he starts to sink. *Lord, save me*, he cries, and Christ reaches out and grabs hold of him and says, *You of little faith, why did you doubt?* Peter and Jesus get into the boat as the storm subsides. All the disciples worship Jesus, confessing, *Truly, you are the son of God*.

We like to poke fun at Peter for having what my grandmother would call "a sinking spell." But I believe he should get credit for stepping out of the boat in the first place. Through faith, he challenged reality itself. He did this against all reason. No one can walk on water. But having observed Jesus doing it, he gives it a shot. And he succeeds until he becomes aware of the chaos raging around him and fear envelopes him. Fear is real. It can affect all of us.

This week, I read a disturbing piece of news. According to the Centers for Disease Control, more people in the United States died from suicide last year than any other year on record. I'm talking per capita. In 2022, nearly 50,000 people died from intentional self-harm. In other words, for every 100,000 people, that is 14.9 deaths. This is a trend that has been rising for the past 15 years. In 2021, suicide was the eleventh leading cause of death, just ahead of influenza and pneumonia.

As I look back on my campaign experience, what I've come to realize is that the church is unique. I know this in theory, and I preach it weekly, but the past couple

of months have confirmed it for me in ways I had not seen before. The church is not like the world. We are different, we are set apart. Our goals are different. Our values are different. Our purpose is different. The world lives for itself. Its interest is its own. The world is selfish and self-interested. Because of this, the world lives in fear.

The church, on the other hand, is called by Christ to live in hope. The church is called to care for others. Jesus' summation of this call is to love God and love our neighbors. This is not a message that you find in the world. It is certainly not one I found on the campaign trail.

Now, there are lots of groups and clubs and organizations out there who do good things. But they do good things for the purpose of doing good. That is about as far as it goes. The church purposely does not do good for the sake of doing good. We do good in order to serve God and God's kingdom. Our purpose is much higher than anything the world can imagine.

We've had two funerals at this church this week. At every funeral I am reminded that there are two types of people in this world—church people and non-church people. At funerals, the non-church people are the ones who are filled with fear and anxiety. They are terrified by the idea of their own mortality. They are lost. Church people, on the other hand, are easy to identify. They are the ones filled with an assuredness that stems from hope. Yes, they grieve for the one that they've lost, and they should. But they do not let this grief transform into a debilitating fear. Rev. Johnston, whose funeral was on Thursday, reminded me of this. He had requested that the following verse from the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews be printed in his funeral bulletin. That verse reads, *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (Hebrews 1:1).

What I experienced this summer is that so many people in this world feel like they have fallen out of a boat and are sinking in rough seas. The job of the church—our job—is to show these people the hand of Christ who offers the hope that will lift them up from drowning in fear.

Our ministries to the community are not simply ministries of aid, they should be more than that. They should be ministries of hope. Our work with Compassionate Hands is not just to get people off the street for a night; through that ministry, we are offering a hand of compassion to lift up those who are sinking into chaos.

As Christians, we have a job to do. It is our job to proclaim the gospel message to a world gripped in fear, to reach out in faith with a hand of hope, and, if necessary, to walk on water.

Amen.