

My personal Scripture readings this past week included the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel and the angelic encounters of Mary and Zachariah. Both Mary and Zachariah heard the angel say, "Fear not." As I reflected on the "fear not" and the theme of the third day of VBS, Jesus gives us the **Power to be Brave**, I realized the angel could have said, "Be brave!" For isn't not being afraid the same as being brave? Strength and bravery seem to come from some place deep within us. A power we did not know we had.

Have you ever been in a boat in a storm? We have. We saw the fear on the faces of our fellow passengers and, probably, they the fear in ours. We were returning to Panay from Romblom (ferries are the only mode of transportation to and from many islands in the Philippines). We were in a small boat with about 50 other passengers. It was a short ride of about an hour, but it also took us several miles from any land. The sky quickly grew black; the crew put sheets of plastic over us, closed the windows and waited for the storm. The wind and rain quickly overtook us. We knew there was no radar, no radio, no way of calling for help should help be needed. We also knew that there were probably only a few, if any at all, life jackets on board. The motor did not fail, the captain knew the direction and we made it safely to the harbor. We had survived the storm. We should have "feared not".

It had been a long and difficult day for Jesus and the disciples. They had learned of the death of John the Baptist and were seeking to get away. They needed some quiet time to mourn. They get into a boat and head to a solitary place, but the crowds note where they are going and run on land to be there to meet them when they arrive. The Scripture tells us that Jesus "had compassion on them." The day is spent healing the sick, sharing the Good News of the Gospel. As the day ends Jesus acknowledges their need for food and 5,000+ are fed. Knowing the implications of these events, the pressure from the crowd for more miracles, Jesus puts the disciples back into the boat and sends them off. After he dismisses the crowds he finds a solitary place and prays through much of the night.

The disciples on the other hand encounter a storm. As Jesus is praying they are struggling with the wind and waves of a storm at night. The fact that it is a storm at night makes matters worse. They have no sense of direction in the night. There are no lights on the shores, the clouds have hidden the stars and there are no lighthouses to give direction. They struggle for hours making no headway against the wind. I am sure there is fear on their faces. Even experienced fishermen/boatmen know when the wind and waves are too much. They are in trouble. How long can they battle the storm?

Early in the morning, perhaps nearing dawn, they see a figure walking to them on the water. Is it a ghost? Maybe they have died in the storm and not realized it. They are more afraid. The words from Jesus are, "Fear not" or "Be brave." Peter speaks for them all, "Lord, if it is you let me come to you." He needs some concrete assurance this is Jesus. Jesus says "Okay!" Peter leaves the

boat and heads for Jesus. Then he again notices the wind and the waves. What has he done? His bravery is gone. Sinking he calls for help. Jesus reaches out and they get back in the boat. The question from Jesus is: Where is your faith? Why were you not brave?

Be brave, don't be afraid, are words we often say. They are easier to say than to do. A part of the Boy Scout motto reminds us that a scout is brave. We talk about how brave we would be in circumstances and then... I wonder if this is why Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs. They would find strength from one another. Bravery is easier when you have someone alongside you, supporting, encouraging and helping you. Jesus is there. So we say, "Be brave!"

A young boy was afraid of the dark. It was during the winter months when darkness comes early and stays long. He was in the kitchen with his mother and dinner was being readied. His mother needed a can of peas from the pantry. (This was back when homes had pantries). The young boy was asked to go to the pantry and get mom a can of peas. He knew there was no light in the pantry. He ignored her words. After several gentle requests mom's voice took on the tone that only mom's voices can get. She needed the peas and she needed them now.

He gently reminded her that it was dark in the pantry and that he was not fond of the dark. She not so gently reminded him that she needed the peas and that Jesus was always with him, even in the pantry. He needed to get her the peas, NOW. Stomping his feet he walked to the pantry door, threw it open and yelled, "Jesus if you're in there throw me out a can of peas!"

We know how he feels. The wind is blowing, the waves are lapping at our feet and we are afraid. We need courage we do not have, strength we seem unable to summon.

It is in these moments we discover the strength we did not know we had. As we look back we realize that we were empowered in those moments and we ask where we found the strength, the bravery to meet such demands. We then realize that we were not alone. We had someone with us, helping and guiding us the whole time. We hear again the words, "Why are you afraid?" "Why were you not brave?" We reply it is easier to say than to do.

Do you remember the story of the Transfiguration? Jesus and the three come down from the mountain and find the nine left behind had failed in trying to rid a young boy of a demon. The father explains the boy's problem to Jesus and Jesus asks the father, "Do you believe?" I think the father answers for all of us, "I believe. Help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

We too believe, but. We need help in believing. However, our assurance is: strength, bravery does come. This is the assurance of the Psalmist. David knew long, lonely nights as a shepherd. He knew what it meant to watch over sheep. He knew, also, of the one who watched over him. "The Lord is my shepherd." There, in the good and bad times of life, in the dark valleys and on the mountaintops there is one who walks beside. We are not alone. Be not afraid, keep rowing, ignore the wind and the waves—I am with you.

As I thought if this I remembered a wonderful paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm written by a Native American (author is anonymous). Its imagery again reminds us that Jesus gives us the power to be brave.

The Great Father above a shepherd Chief is. I am His and with Him I want not. He throws out to me a rope and the name of the rope is love and He draws me to where the grass is green and the water not dangerous, and I eat and lie down and am satisfied. Sometimes my heart is very weak and falls down and he lifts me up again and draws me into a good road. His name is WONDERFUL.

Sometime, it may be very soon, it may be a long, long time, He will draw me into a valley. It is dark there, but I'll be afraid not, for it is between those mountains that the Shepherd Chief will meet me and the hunger that I have in my heart all through this life will be satisfied. Sometimes He makes the rope into a whip, but afterwards

He gives me a staff to lean upon. He spreads a table before me with all kinds of foods. He puts His hand upon my head and all the "Tired" is gone. My cup He fills till it runs over. What I tell is true. I lie not. These roads that are "away ahead" will stay with me through this life and after; and afterwards I will go and live in the Big Tepee and will sit down with the SHEPHERD CHIEF forever.

Amen and Amen!