

Fearlessly Forward**Laura Webb- Wall Street United Church, August 13, 2023**

Jeremiah 29:13 says: You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

As we gather to worship today - I want to remind you that Jesus longs to be found by each of us. If we seek God, we will find God. We will seek God in nature, in and through each other, in song, in scripture, in our times of joy and in our times of pain. As you heard the scripture read today, you may have remembered that Pastor Kim spoke on this in the last year. I can't find exactly when, but I do remember the quote she shared from Zig Ziglar, one of the greatest salesmen and motivational speakers. He said, "Face Everything and Run or Face Everything and Rise!" Pastor Kim reminded us that with God we can face everything, and that He is always with us. This morning with the children we heard the story of Scaredy Squirrel, who was too afraid to leave his tree. Today I want to quote Melanie Watt, the author of "Scaredy Squirrel", who writes "Face Everything and Repeat!"

I think it is rather timely that the lectionary has handed us this scripture and that we are able to circle back to this topic of facing fears or challenges. Given the journey that we are embarking on — Fearlessly Forward — it is my prayer that we can hear today what God is speaking to us as we move into our visioning process.

Many years ago, I had my dream summer job, as a canoe trip leader in Northern Ontario. We, (usually at least 2 of us) took girls aged 10 to 16 on canoe trips. On one such trip a storm blew in on Lake Temagami. As a leader I was scared, but I could never let on. Where could we get off the water and shelter from the storm? Thankfully we found a place to get the canoes out and throw up some tarps. We prayed and we sang to pass the time, we ate, and we sang, we prayed some more, and finally the clouds broke, and we were able to get to a camp site as the sun was setting. God was with us, going before us!

How many of you have seen Lucie's fitness videos? She has done an amazing job creating these videos; however, my first reaction was to run! I can't do this! But I know, if I would just repeat it a few times, I am sure I could tackle them. Thank you, Lucie, for stepping out of the boat and sharing your God-given giftedness with us.

Finally, some kayaking stories. I have always been afraid to lose my phone in the water, but I take it with me anyway to capture beautiful moments of solitude. Low and behold, as some of you know, I did lose my phone in the river, and what a gift it was — it opened my world up and got my face out of my phone for 2.5 weeks! I've also been afraid this season to go out on my own. I've actually been afraid of many things this year ... What if my heart stops? Thankfully, little by little I have been backout on the river and I know that God is in control of my life. Last one.... A friend of mine asked me

to go kayaking with her. She wanted to face her fear/uncertainty about getting back out on the river after having taken a number of years away from the water. She braved it, and she rocked it! Friends, when we face our fears together, they really are not nearly as scary as we thought they'd be.

So, what are you afraid of facing? Fear of not being enough, Fear of not having enough, Fear of what tomorrow will bring?

How about the fear of driving? My son had a fender bender 2 years ago, and he still does not want to drive. Sometimes we fear things because something bad has happened to us.... But really, we just need to get back in the saddle. Once our nephew rode the train with his mom and they encountered a drunk person. Now he thinks the train is way too dangerous to take! We sometimes get these ideas that people, situations or change can be scary. Regardless of what "boat" you need to step out of, you do not have to do it alone. So how can we deal with these fears?

This morning's scripture and the children's story give us some good ideas when it comes to facing our fears. Scaredy Squirrel says, "Face everything and Repeat – there is so much to be discovered!" Given that we are in this time of moving "Fearlessly Forward by Visioning Forward", I want to assure myself and you that we are not alone in this journey. God has been with us through the years and will be with us into the future. We just have to acknowledge who God is and do what he asks of us.

Robin, thank you for reading the scripture today! Now, to recap the story that Robin read: Jesus had just spent the day teaching and healing a huge crowd of people that had gathered near Bethsaida at the sea of Galilee, and then rather than sending them off to a local fast-food joint, he fed this huge crowd of people after blessing only 5 loaves and 2 fishes. He asked his disciples to be involved by distributing the food and then by gathering up the remains. Jesus asked them to help meet the needs of those in the crowd who were seeking him. This is a reminder that Jesus can take our little bits of offering and service and make them into something amazing ... in fact so amazing that it multiplies exponentially! Notice that today's scripture starts with the word 'Immediately'. Immediately after feeding the crowds, Jesus sent his disciples off. Not after they cleaned up, not after having checked the weather app, or consulting his wise calendar keeper, Jesus sent his disciples off across the Sea of Galilee to get to their next location.

Weirdly, Jesus did not escape in the boat with his disciples. Rather he stayed to dismiss the crowds. It doesn't say he dismissed the crowds and then he crashed with a bottle of wine or remote control in his hand ... rather he dismissed the crowds and then went away to pray. After the craziness Jesus went away to pray, to connect with God. What about you? After a crazy day, what do you do to recharge, to make you ready for the next unknown adventure? Pausing for Prayer is Powerful my friends!

Scripture says it was late in the day when Jesus sent his disciples off in the boat. Did Jesus not know boating safety? It made me wonder if God sometimes sends us into a place that might be a little bit risky. It was likely going to be dark before they arrived on the other side, and there was a risk in boating in the dark, not to mention the storms that could come up. Jesus knew the Sea of Galilee was known for its sudden windy, stormy conditions. But the disciples set off, knowing they had been sent by Jesus to the other side. Why would things be wavy or stormy if Jesus had sent them? Isn't life supposed to be clear sailing with Jesus directing the way?

At this point, Let's pause and notice what Jesus did in this story, not just the 1980's WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? but WDJD - What Did Jesus Do! Repeatedly! Jesus met the needs of those who came to Him. Jesus went away and prayed. Then being recharged, Jesus showed up in the chaos. Jesus gave us an example of how to be present when others are feeling fear. Jesus extended an invitation to Peter to join him on the water. When Peter was struggling, Jesus took his hand, walked him back to the boat and brought a sense of calm. Friends, in our time of fear and uncertain conditions, we need to focus on who God is — not on who we are. God has and will show up!!

Richard Rohr, a brilliant priest, author, and teacher highlighted that “We are used to the predictable – with anything outside of that there is fear.” Therefore, Jesus' walking on water does not cause a childlike response like a kid watching a magic show. Rather, it raises fear. In his state of unknowing and fear, Peter calls out to Jesus. Jesus does not *command* Peter to get out of the boat, rather He *invites* him to come to him, to risk getting out of the boat — to get out of the predictable and into the unknown.

As I reflected on today's scripture reading, I couldn't help but think of the Scaredy Squirrel story I used to read to my kids. As a church, or as individuals I wonder if we are like most of the disciples who stayed in the boat, or are we like Peter, willing to jump out into tumultuous waves, where Jesus invites us to join him? Joining him in the great unknown? I wonder if we as a church are like the squirrel before it fell out of the tree, discovering he was actually meant for more? Scaredy Squirrel, like most of the disciples, thought he was content staying in the confines of what he knew. He knew he existed well in the tree. But Scaredy Squirrel did not realise his superpower until he fell into it.

I am prayerful that our visioning process is designed to help us be clear on who we are, and perhaps discover some things that are beneath the surface, that can only be seen as we step into the new. Unless we take the time to examine who we are, we are simply living out of what we know. As a church, it is my hope that we want to build on living out of who God wants us to be.

When Jesus notices that Peter begins to sink and is asking for help, he takes him by the hand and asks him why he has so little faith. One of the articles I read by Mitzi Smith suggested that “Sometimes faith is seeing the boat for what it is — a shared experience and the opportunity to lean on one another, to encourage each other in the storm while waiting on God.” Peter was eager to leave his shipmates and to join Jesus, rather than to wait for Jesus to join them in the boat. Sometimes we want our own miracle *at the expense of* others who are in the same boat as us. Jesus reached out his hand and caught Peter, and they both got into the boat with the other disciples. It is when they are all in the boat together with Jesus that the winds calm down.

To me this quote says we need to be moving ahead together, with Jesus as our guide. My friends, we are inviting each of you as congregation members to have a voice, so that we do not rush ahead as single members, but that we meet Jesus together, having brought many voices together. Often, we don’t like change. We picture ourselves as one thing, when we really have the potential to be who we are — plus more. Maybe your idea is one we have not thought of, and God is speaking through you! As we recognise who Jesus is, we won’t be leading the charge, but joining the Spirit where it is at work.

Friends, as we look at our amazing Wall Street United Church family and all God is doing in and through us, I am grateful. So, I know that we are likely all feeling different things. To some of you, it might not feel like we are in a storm right now, to others you may feel we are in the calm before the storm, and some of you may feel that we are in a storm of uncertainty. Perhaps we are like a frog boiling in a pot of water.....not really aware that churches are closing all across Canada at a rapid rate. We need to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us as individuals and as a church so that we can continue to be a reflection of Jesus in our community.

As we looked at the Gospel of Scaredy Squirrel and the Gospel from Matthew 14, we are reminded that we need to step out of our comfort zone knowing that God is calling us forward to new things. Likely not starting from scratch but building on the foundation that has been established by those who went before us. Friends, as we embark on this Fearlessly Forward journey, it doesn’t mean it won’t be without its bumps or delays, but I believe as we step forward into the unknown, that we are moving out to a place where God has gone before us and will continue to go before us.

In closing I want to share a quote by A.J. Cronin from Spencer Johnson’s book – “Who Moved my Cheese?” If you have this book at home, please reread it. It has some brilliant ideas in it. “Life is not a straight and easy corridor along which we travel free and unhampered, but a maze of passages, through which we must seek our way, lost and confused, now and again checked in a blind alley. But always, if we have faith, God will open a door for us, not perhaps one that we ourselves would ever have thought of, but one that will ultimately prove good for us. AMEN.