

TEXT: 1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33  
THEME: Take heart, it is I  
SUBJECT: Courage  
TITLE: "What are you doing here?"

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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Messiah Moravian  
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"Today people generally imagine that resistance was something quite out of the ordinary, something heroic. We ourselves never used the word resistance at all . . . We just did something." Feya von Moltke, a German-American attorney who during WWII acted to subvert Germany's human-rights abuses, and following the war lectured on totalitarianism versus democracy.

"One grew into it and couldn't say at any particular point, 'Now the resistance is beginning.' For at that time resistance didn't exist at all. One was in opposition from the beginning." Barbara von Haeften, who supported her husband and brother-in-law as they carried out the 20 July 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler.

For Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, German activist, lawyer, jurist, and author, the resistance gradually coalesced and took concrete form, until no point of return was reached and everything pointed inevitably toward assassination. Marion's classmate at the Grunewald-Gymnasium was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. She was arrested and imprisoned. Following the war she resumed work as a judge.

Feya and her husband Helmuth, Barbara and her husband Hans Bernd, Marion and her husband Peter, along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, participated in the Kreisau Circle, named after the estate owned by Helmuth's family. This group planned for governance after Hitler.

In his last letter to Marion, Peter wrote "I believe I have gone some way to atone for the guilt of our heritage." He was particularly fearless and steadfast. At his trial conducted by the notorious Nazi judge, Roland Freisler, Peter told the court "The vital point running through all these questions is the totalitarian claim of the state over the citizen to the exclusion of his religious and moral obligations toward God."

Helmuth, Hans Bernd, Peter and Dietrich were executed for their participation in the resistance. In the multitude of studies on the resistance, Sabine Dramm came across one text that gave her essential help in understanding the work of the Kreisau Circle: "The system depended on the permanence of fear. To overcome the fear in order to obey one's moral conviction and to translate it into action was not just the first commandment; it was also the prime characteristic of someone fighting in the resistance."

Resistance is inconceivable without an understanding of the fear emanating from "the system." It is inconceivable without the surmounting of personal fear, inconceivable without the courage to endanger oneself and to endure the fear in the self-endangering—the goal being to bring about the end of the system of fear.

Elijah knew something about fear, about a system of government that generated and perpetuated fear. Ahab, King of Northern Israel in the 9th century BCE, married Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel's reign is portrayed as one of chaos, defined by famine, drought, royal abuse of power, loss of societal boundaries, and unfaithfulness to God.

Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard. Naboth refused to sell or swap and the king went into a funk. Jezebel asked if he was "a king or a cup of custard" (Frederick Buechner). Jezebel manipulated Israel's legal system to convict Naboth on a trumped up charge and had Naboth stoned to death. Elijah, whom Ahab experienced as a royal pain in the neck, confronted the king. A contest ensued between Elijah and Jezebel's prophet's of Baal. Elijah won, killing all of Jezebel's prophets. In return, Jezebel sought to kill Elijah.

Today's reading from 1 Kings 19 continues the story. Elijah flees for his life and hides in a cave. One may hide from Jezebel, but hiding from God is another matter. Ask Jonah. God confronts Elijah asking, "What are you doing here?" Elijah complains about how tough his life is, how he is the only one resisting evil and how the queen wants to kill him. God assures Elijah he is not alone. God is with him along with seven thousand other resistance fighters left in Israel. "Stop whining and get back to work!"

Jesus' form of resistance to the Roman Empire is less violent. Jesus teaches the people a more excellent way. Yet, the principal enemy remains fear. The gospel reading portrays a boat battered by a severe storm. The boat is an image of the church. Think Noah's ark, the ark of salvation. The storm that endangers the boat is the persecution perpetrated by Rome.

Rome's rule is dependent on generating and perpetuating fear. The road signs marking the way from Rome to Jerusalem were corpse covered crosses, drenched with the blood of those who dared buck the system. Rome knew, as all totalitarian states have known, that fear greases the wheels of greater and greater control. Fear is freedom's foe. Fascism feeds on fear, a fear that makes one furtive and dishonest and unadventurous.

At the outset of the cold war, the distinguishing mark of the emerging generation under Soviet governance was their incapacity for independent thought. They invariably thought in dogmas, the course of their thinking was always politicized and narrowly pragmatic. The basic cause of this intellectual narrowness, of the fact that people thought only along officially prescribed lines, was fear. (Eric Karpeles, *Almost Nothing*, p 271)

Jesus' message to a frightened church is, "Take heart (have courage), it is I; be not afraid." Walking on water is not a sign of courage. Drowning while attempting to walk on water is not a sign of lack of faith. Thinking you can walk on water is magical thinking. Only God can walk on water. Faith is the courage to trust God is in the boat with us.

When Peter says, "Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water," he is looking for proof. Peter is echoing the voice of the devil in the temptation story: "*If* you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Faith is not proven by a suspension of natural laws, but by the courage to trust the promise, "I am with you." Perhaps Jesus knows the only way to cure Peter of magical thinking is to let him try to act like God.

Fear does not tremble in the face of magical thinking. If while in the boat Peter was afraid of the storm or the ghost, his fear blossoms as he begins to sink beneath the waves. The only antidote to fear is faith, is courage, is trust, is love of the good, is—in short—when our fears are governed by the fear of God.

A church that challenges the powers of this world will find itself in the middle of some very stormy seas. To take heart, to be courageous, to trust God, means the fear we experience far from land in a trackless sea, buffeted by winds and waves, will not dominate our lives. Fear dominates our lives when we assume our task is to survive.

Fear, inflamed by the pandemic, is trading the messiness of democracy for the “certitude” and “security” of totalitarian rule (Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*). The promise of authoritarianism is security. Fear will trade freedom for security every day of the week. When we settle into our securities, our caves, God finds and asks, “What are you doing here?”

Elijah knew fear. Peter knew fear. The Kreisau Circle knew fear. But they knew a greater fear, the fear of God. They embraced a mission worthy of their lives. Fear cannot dominate our lives if we have good work to do. Resisting totalitarian tendencies, fighting for freedom, is good work.

PRAYER: Matthew 14:23, “After having dismissed the crowds Jesus ascended the mountain by himself to pray. And when evening arrived he was there alone.” (Hart’s translation)

Wendell Berry

I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes  
and lives a while in my sight.  
What it fears in me leaves me,  
and the fear of me leaves it.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.  
What I fear in it leaves it,  
and the fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,  
mute in my consternations,  
I hear my song at last,  
and I sing it. As we sing,  
the day turns, the trees move.