

I noticed something in these readings that I'd never caught before. And it kinda cracks me up. In that Gospel reading, when God's voice booms from the heavens, Peter and his buddies cower in fear. God says, "This is my son, the beloved; with him I am well-pleased; listen to him." And they hit the dirt. I mean, it's a completely reasonable response. I don't want to pick on Peter for getting spooked by a close encounter of the divine kind. There's a long tradition of angels and messengers of God showing up, scaring the snot out of their audience, and then attempting to calm them down by hollering "BE NOT AFRAID." If I'm honest, if a 10-foot tall glowing humanoid with wings appeared in my bedroom unannounced, I'd pull the covers over my head so it couldn't see me. Or if I was walking along the towpath and suddenly saw the eldritch horror of an eyeball-covered gyroscope yelling at me about signs, I'd turn tail and run. I mean, I kinda hope I would. I might just get stuck there, frozen in fear. "Be not afraid," my big toe.

So yeah, when Jesus levitates bioluminescently and strikes up a conversation with the force ghosts of old prophets and a disembodied voice booms from the clouds, I get it. Of course Peter and the others would fall to the ground. Maybe it's deference, maybe it's duck and cover. Maybe it's just strength giving out at the sight of so much incomprehensible all at once. But, here's what tickles me. Later on, Peter writes about this incident in a letter. He witnessed that majestic moment and assures his audience that, no matter how wild it sounds, he didn't make it up. He really was there. He really saw and really heard. And now he proclaims a light in the darkness, Jesus, the Son of God ... while neglecting to mention that pesky spine-melting moment of abject terror. Now, I want to be clear. I'm not picking on Peter 'cause he got scared. I'm picking on Peter because he conveniently forgot to tell us how scared he was.

I mean, again, I get it. If you want to convert folks, you need a fair bit of confidence. You don't want to appear weak. Also, the patriarchy being what it is, these fellas feel the need to present at least a degree of manliness, and manly men don't get scared. Or if they do, they turn that fear into brave acts of heroism. What big strong brave manly men don't do is crawl away in terror. At least, that's what Peter's probably thinking. Word's already gotten out about his denials, so his PR campaign might not be able to withstand another glimpse of his just-like-the-rest-of-us humanity. He needs to be a leader staring down whatever his mission brings before him. It especially cracks me up because Peter is a brave dude. He's a little rash, but he muscles up the courage to do some wild things. He kinda reminds me of Forrest Gump. He's lovable and loyal and trusting and not all that bright. He'll leap into the waves to swim to shore, he'll race to the grave of his executed friend in spite of the dangers of being seen, and at one point he trusts Jesus so deeply that he walks on water -- it's only a few steps, but it's more than almost anyone else ever does. It's his fear that makes him sink.

And actually, I wonder if that's where Peter is when he's writing his letter. He knows his story better than we do, and he remembers all the times he put his trust in Jesus. Amazing things happened, the highs and lows of human life come and go with more meaning and beauty than he ever knew there could be in the world, highs and lows come with Christ, and he's so grateful for them all. But he knows fear is his downfall. On choppy waters, fear literally sank him. And watching court proceedings, fear made him say he didn't know Jesus from Adam. Two of the most defining moments of his time with Jesus, and fear just had to nuzzle its way in. Maybe he just couldn't let it happen again. And besides, fear didn't win out up there on the mountain.

You know, it's an enormously courageous thing to evangelize, especially back when Peter was doing it. Maybe he just couldn't let these fears pile up too high, and maybe he felt like the mask of courage made his message easier to believe for those that heard it. Or maybe he needed that mask of courage to convince himself. Every sermon, every letter, every side-of-the-road baptism, every time he told the story of Jesus, he'd need that

mask. Maybe Peter faked it 'til he made it? And at some point, he did make it. At some point, he got more confident. His preaching's good enough. I mean, he'll only convert 3,000 with a single homily, but who am I to judge? He'll stand up to Paul, which few had the guts to pull off. He'll set up shop in Rome, and he'll even grow accustomed to supernatural things happening around him. Clearly Peter was doing something right. But he won't talk about his fear, which makes me think it's still in there, needling away. Wouldn't it have been cool to hear Peter name his biggest stumbling block? Would his letters have changed if, when he told the story of bioluminescent Jesus floating with the prophets above the holy hill, would anything have changed if he'd told folks how afraid he was? I mean, the overall story wouldn't've. We'd still have the focus on Jesus: that he is something more than a good preacher with a nice philosophy. But could the congregations of the early aughts have benefitted from some honest soul-baring?

Honestly, I can't say how they would've heard it, but I'd've loved to. I'd love to hear Peter preach about the fear of following Jesus. It's a demanding thing, and it means facing down some mighty frightening moments, maybe even evil ones. And it means, maybe just as scary, falling before the overwhelming glory of God. Can we answer that same call? When our legs give out and our hearts race and all we want to do is pull up the covers or crawl under a rug, do we have the faith to stand back up? Do we have the strength to enter the world changed? Or maybe more realistically, unchanged but now trusting in God's love? Maybe the fear doesn't go away so much as it gets channeled. Maybe the willingness to talk about this stuff comes with practice. Maybe showing up comes with the discipline of showing up over and over. Maybe our lives do change because the miraculous life of this place feeds us together, our own holy hill where the sacred happens right in front of us every week, and we're so used to it that we long ago stopped being afraid. If you're not sure what about this whole Sunday morning thing could be so scary, good, I'm glad for you. But if you are, know that you're not alone.

Now, I know this place that holds our fears with such reassurance, I know it's gonna look a little different soon. Know this: St. Thomas' may look a little different, but it'll still host the sacred, still hold our fears, and still feed our souls. And it'll still shine like a light shining in the darkness. Maybe it's deciding what color to use, or finally risking that conversation with a friend, or standing up for the oppressed, or housing the poor, or feeding the hungry, or caring for the stranger in a strange land, or that good ol' fashioned loving our neighbors. But however we do stick our necks out for God, though it might be with faith *and* fear, like Peter, we'll do it, a light ever shining in the darkness.