

## **To Believe or Not to Believe**

*Jesse Larson-9/19/10*

This image of the disciples in a boat being over come by gushing water and massive waves reminds me of the time I went whitewater rafting in Zimbabwe on the Zambezi River. I was 20 years old, studying abroad in Namibia and having the time of my life. We had a long weekend, and so being wild and crazy college students, we drove 24 hours to Zimbabwe to the breath-taking Victoria Falls. Shortly after arriving we found that there were some rather exciting things to do in Victoria Falls, such as bungee jumping and white water rafting. Everybody wanted to go white water rafting, and not knowing any better, I decided to go as well. Soon enough we were signing legal waivers; we were informed that a few people did die every year on this river. I was definitely wondering what I got myself into.

As we hiked down the steep gorge to the river's edge, more butterflies danced in my stomach. My hands were sweating. We were taught some safety techniques and then we were on our way. Also, you should know that these rapids of the Zambezi were the highest class – class V – which can be rafted, and as you approach each series of rapids, you cannot see what is coming...it simply looks like you are approaching a waterfall...although you do hear the ominous pounding of the rapids and whitewater. Talk about being terrified. Our incredibly muscular guide, Cephas, also provided us with rather horrifying information about each coming rapid. With each passing rapid, the water was getting more intense, as were the delightful names of each rapid...names like “The dishwasher”, “The Terminator” and “Overland monster truck masher.” At one

point, Cephas pointed to a tumultuous area of the rapids called “The Temple of Doom.” He said we cannot go there. I asked, “why not?” He responded, “Because we will die.”

There is no way for me to describe to you how intense and powerful these rapids were...waves poured over us, and despite our best efforts, usually one or two people were blasted off the raft during each rapid. And let me just say that it does, in fact, feel like you are in a dish washer when you are thrown into the raging river and held under water for what seems like an eternity. The final rapid was the worst and it was simply known that we would all be flipped once we hit it. Its name, you wonder, was “Oblivion.” My heart trembled. It was truly just a wall of whitewater that was impossible to pass. Our raft was sucked down, filled with water immediately, and then we were flipped. We were obliterated. And it was terrifying.

This was indeed a scary experience. To say I was afraid is putting it mildly. It’s a great story now, but when I was on the river, I wanted off as soon as possible. So, all this is to say that I really feel for the disciples in this text. Who wouldn’t be afraid? I also feel bad for the disciples as it seems they were chided by Jesus just for trying to save their lives. A storm is tossing the ship around, water is engulfing the ship, and Jesus asks them, “Where is your faith?” Well, Jesus, at this point I’m not so much concerned with my faith, as I am my life and whether I’m going to lose it. Can you help, please!??

But, as usual, I think Jesus sees a teaching moment and he is trying to point the disciples and us towards a profound truth in our lives...that in all situations, good and bad, frightening and mundane, our faith must be in God. I think the message is quite simple and clear. If we accept this fact – if we believe and keep the faith – we have no

reason to be afraid. If we are not afraid, we are ready to live the lives that God would have us live.

Jesus understood that fear sets up obstacles in our lives which prevent us from living fully and from helping others. After all, what is the purpose of all of the fear-mongering that is going on these days. The threat of burning Qurans is to fuel hate and division between Christians and Muslims. The pontificated possibilities of what might happen if we allow an Islamic community center near the 9/11 are meant to scare us. When people are afraid we lose all trust and all our energies go toward isolating ourselves, protecting ourselves, building fortifications and getting trigger-happy. Our unbridled fears can also make us reprioritize our values, so much so, that many times we allow ourselves to justify discrimination, ignorance, violence, war and torture. And we all know how Jesus felt about this stuff. It just doesn't get us anywhere and it most certainly prohibits us from building the Kingdom of God.

One might argue that fear helps to keeps us alive. That is true, and despite the fact that Jesus often took risks and encouraged others to do so, I don't believe that Jesus advised being foolish or taking life for granted. But, Jesus is showing us that in him – not fear - there is true freedom, joy and peace. And one must wonder if a life is worth living if fear becomes our compass.

Given our 100 year celebration, today is a particularly good day to acknowledge how important it is to recognize all that has happened in the past. Every generation lives in frightening times. I believe it's a human universal. We now live in an era of global warming, extremism and economic instability. During the 1960s, folks lived amidst the turmoil of racial strife, social upheaval and protest. Could you imagine what would have

happened if the fear-mongers would have won back then? Black and whites might still be living in separate societies. CPC itself was founded in tumultuous days. As George mentioned, the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was marked by labor struggles, pollution, financial strife, and all the while the bells of war were beginning to ring for what would be called the world's first world war. But, did everyone hide away and give into their fears? Sure some did. Some searched for scape-goats and encouraged hatred and distrust. But, many others moved forward, boldly and faithfully. Many cast their lot with the faithful God of hope. I'm sure many people felt it was foolish to build a church near the ISU campus, in the middle of a field far from the center of town...but here we are 100 years later. Praise be to God.

But what happens when we really find our lives on the line? Indeed, perhaps my illustration about white water rafting wasn't that helpful because this was a risk I chose to take. What happens when, through no fault or choice of our own, we find our lives in danger? Perhaps we've just received an unsettling diagnosis. Untreatable cancer. Maybe we learned that our company is bound for Afghanistan. What if you receive a prison sentence. These are the times in which we are truly terrified. We call out to God, wondering, "why me" and we beg for God to save us.

I don't think we'll ever have a reason for why bad things happen...to good or bad people. And no matter how hard we try to protect ourselves, to insulate ourselves, to do everything right, the truth is that bad things - frightening things - will happen in our lives. And, all of us, sooner or later, will be faced with the most frightening prospect of all – death.

It is at this point that we must look to the final sentence of our text for today. After Jesus calms the waters and the wind, the disciples wonder “what manner of man is this; he even commands the winds and water, and they obey him.” This final point is very important as it reinforces the idea that Jesus is not, in fact, a normal man...Jesus is the son of God. The disciples were given a first-hand opportunity to see that Jesus – that God – was capable of extraordinary miracles and goodness. Through his acts and teachings, his followers, including ourselves, have learned that in Christ, we find life, peace, wholeness, and salvation. Although this message has been promoted for over 2000 years, we all still struggle with truly believing whether Jesus is the son of God who came to give us eternal life, or if there is no God and that death has the last word. And I don’t know about you, but this latter option does not relieve my fears nor does it give me much hope. I choose to believe.

It was almost two years ago since I was first hospitalized with the blood clots in my lungs and leg. Talk about being scared. As I was lying in bed, feeling quite beat down and afraid, my dad, speaking to me over the phone, recognized that I was wallowing in my fear and sadness. He then asked me the following question, “Well, Jess, we need to ask ourselves whether we really believe this stuff or not. Do we believe that we will go on to be with God or don’t we?” It’s often not until our backs are against the wall that we really have to face the questions of “what is gonna happen when I die?” and “is there really a God?” Always graceful, Jesus repeatedly assures us that we have no need to be afraid, as we will be joining him in heaven. He teaches us that we should boldly live our lives, without fear, so that we might show the love of God for all people.

Without fear or worry, we should strive to carry out Christ's call to care for the outcaste and the sick, to visit the imprisoned, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked.

Jesus gave his disciples and us his blessed assurance – that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Jesus died to save us, so regardless of what storms or other scary things come our way, Jesus will be with us, in this world and the next. Brothers and sisters, keep the faith! Amen.