Jonah 1:1-17

—Now the word of the L ORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 2 “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” 3 But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the L ORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

4 But the L ORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep.

6 The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

7 The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

8 Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”

9 “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the L ORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

10 Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the L ORD, because he had told them so.

11 Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. 14 Then they cried out to the L ORD, “Please, O L ORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O L ORD, have done as it pleased you.”

15 So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.

16 Then the men feared the L ORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the L ORD and made vows.

17 But the L ORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Our Gospel reading is from the common lectionary, a suggested series of readings for three years in the church—the lectionary is shared by Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans…even some Southern Baptists! What is striking to me is how often a lectionary reading makes a current connection. After all, here we are without any cushions on the pews and we have the only text that I know in the Bible that mentions a cushion! Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat on a cushion. So, listen to Mark 4:35-41…with feeling!

Mark 4:35-41—31 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” 32 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 33 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 34 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” 35 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 36 He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” 37 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

A man of God gets on a boat and he and the rest of the occupants head out into the open waters. The man of God falls asleep, even as massive storm arises. All the occupants of the boat panic at the storm—they know they are in mortal danger of the boat floundering and their drowning. Their panic fear is overwhelming. The sleeping man of God in the boat has to be awakened from sleep, and showing no fear, he has a solution for the stormy situation. The massive storm subsides and the panic fear of the occupants is replaced by a new fear—a reverential fear, an awe, an astonished amazement.

That is the plot of two Biblical stories—of Jesus on the Sea of Galilee and Jonah on the Mediterranean Sea. There are two kinds of sleep here…and two kinds of fear.
Jonah’s sleep is the sleep of resignation. Jonah is not sleeping because he trusts in the sustaining protection of God. Jonah has had the clear call from God to travel to Nineveh and he goes the opposite way. But Jonah is not going the opposite way because he is afraid. After all, Jonah falls asleep in the boat during a storm and when confronted by the captain by the desperate shape that the boat is in, he is willing to be thrown into the sea to end the storm…end his life. Jonah is not afraid—he’s angry!

What outdoes fear? Anger! Jonah is mad at God…and anger trumps fear. But anger consumes Jonah and the only solution to the storm is to throw Jonah into the sea. Jonah chooses a sort of suicide—he tells the sailors to throw him into the sea. Anger drives out fear…but anger also is self-destructive. Perhaps you know this old proverb (and not by Confucius, as often said): “Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.” The wisdom is that revenge takes the life of another—one grave—and your own—the second grave. Jonah is angry and the anger consumes his life. Jonah is angry with God.

So, who gets angry with God? Anyone who feels that God has acted unjustly, unloving, unworthy of being God! As odd as it might sound, Jonah’s anger is that God will be loving and merciful with people who do not deserve it. Jonah is angry that people who deserve punishment and suffering will get amnesty, a free-pass…forgiveness. He is so angry that he seeks to go where God will not be found. Anger can cure you of fear…but it also takes away your life as well. Jonah’s sleep on board the ship was a giving up of life; his being tossed into the sea was giving up of life.

So, the sleeping Jonah…how about a sleeping Jesus? Jesus, after a full day of work, is snoozing in the back of the boat. In that day’s work, he told a parable about the rule of God, the kingdom of God, in which sleeping is a primary focus. He spoke of the sower who scattered seed on the ground but then simply sleeps. The seed and earth will work together beyond the knowledge and control of the planter. God’s kingdom is like that—we are invited to scatter the seed but then to sleep, to release control to God.

Perhaps Jesus is simply practicing his own preaching here. He gets in the boat after an extended day of ministry with the crowds. He goes to sleep. The ability to sleep peacefully and untroubled is a sign of trust in the sustaining and protective power of God. The sleep of Jesus is this trust that God will provide, as opposed to Jonah’s sleep of angry resignation.

And just as there are two kinds of sleep—a sleep of angry resignation and sleep of peaceful trust—so there are two kinds of fear. Most of us know the first kind of fear—the panic fear. Panic fear is built deeply into our brain, into our nature. Panic fear is that “fight or flight” reaction. We have a bodily reaction that has been an important feature to our safety through thousand of years. Our willingness to fight kept us from being eaten—the predator decided to leave us alone. Our readiness for flight kept us from being eaten—we ran from the predator who decided to come after us.

“Fight or flight” works great in the jungle…but not as well in our communal life. Take, for example, the function of being the lay reader in worship—many people confess to a fear of public speaking. Their heart races; their mind gets a bit muddled, unconscious nervous twitches arise. “Fight or flight” is kicking in—but neither option works well as a solution when you are in a safe setting, have an audience that appreciated your willingness to serve, and you have said “yes” to being the lay reader.
Panic fear is not a matter of choice…it simply overtakes us. And the threat forces us to wonder if God cares for us. That’s the question of the sailors on Jonah’s boat—whether the God or a god cares for them—cares that they are perishing. And the question of the disciples on Jesus’ boat is whether Jesus cares for them—cares that they are perishing.

In both the story of Jonah and of Jesus, the storm is calmed. And in both stories, there is a second fear. The next to last line of our first reading is that the sailors “feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.” (Jonah 1:16). I hope you hear the irony there—irony is when two things go together that do not fit together. Sailors—old “sea dogs”—feared the Lord, worshipped, and turn in pledge cards! Really? And the last line of our second reading is that the disciples “were filled with great awe.” (Mark 4:41). You would recognize the Greek word for “awe” here—phobos, from which we get our word “phobia.” Their panic fear has been replaced by awe, a reverential fear.

Here is a fear to cultivated, to be welcomed. The writer Annie Dillard has a marvelous observation about reverential fear in worship. She reflects on how early Christians had to sneak out and hold services beyond the eyes of rulers, powers, and nosy neighbors. Christians met in the caves—catacombs. Fear of getting caught worshiping was a palpable part of the service—worship was risky behavior. Annie Dillard wrote:

> On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does any-one have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? …The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning…we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."¹

Our nonchalance might offend the “sleeping god.” We are too often clueless of reverential fear. Do we really think we can handle the presence of God—for whom every thing is that is a terror to us is so, so minute? Do we really want to be in the presence of God, the Maker of the universe?

Consider the lyrics of one of the most favored hymns of the 20th century:

> O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
> Consider all the worlds thy hands have made,
> I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
> Thy power throughout the universe displayed:

When you consider all that, then the only thing you can say is: “Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee.”

Two kinds of sleep…two kinds of fear: a sleep of angry resignation and sleep of trust; a fear full of panic and fear full of awe. Our world is filled plenty of anger and plenty of panic—really don’t need anymore. But each time we gather for worship, we make a deposit in the bank of trust—God will provide. And each time we gather for worship, we afford ourselves the opportunity to fear… a reverential fear. May trust and awe increase among us!