



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON EMILY GRIFFIN, CANON VICAR  
THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 4, 2026  
EXODUS 17:1-7; PSALM 19; ACTS 4:5-12; MATTHEW 21:33-46

## CASTING OUT FEAR

**ACTS 4:5-12** *[The rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."]*

This was Peter's worst nightmare. It wasn't long ago, in narrative time anyway, that the fear of confrontation and imprisonment (or worse) made Peter deny Jesus three times, be absent at the cross, and then hide until Easter. Yet here he is, just months later post-Pentecost in today's reading from Acts, boldly proclaiming a faith in Jesus that could and one day would get him killed. He'll keep externally processing and saying too much

because he's Peter, but he won't be that trapped by fear ever again. We'll continue tracking his story for the next several weeks as part of the trial revised common lectionary we're using this fall. My question, though, as we think about what it means to boldly proclaim: what changed for him? Or more to the point, where might we get that freedom from fear in our own lives?

Fear is all over our other readings this morning – both fear of the Lord as reverence or awe and the more familiar, destructive fears we face every day. God, for one, seems to have no problem using fear as a motivator in Exodus. At least, that's how Moses interprets the pyrotechnics surrounding the rollout of the Ten Commandments. Apparently, the people at the base of Mount Sinai didn't get the memo from our psalmist today about the heavens declaring the glory of God and the firmament showing God's handiwork. The people are not awed by the artistry of it all, by the thunder and lightning and smoke; they're just terrified. It happens. Moses assumes that's part of God's point. I mean, without the threat of punishment or the prospect of overwhelming force curbing our worst impulses, what is there to keep us in line?

Perhaps there's another option besides God scaring us into submission. Perhaps our fears say more about us than they do about God. We don't necessarily need to take Moses' interpretation here as our own – although I do think he's trying to leave room for the power of awe to shape us too. In spelling

out what loving God and loving neighbor look like (which is what the Ten Commandments are all about), God is up to something besides saying No – something far more creative and life-giving. Think about it. God did not free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt just to enslave them again to fear. Fears of rejection or failure or scarcity – whatever it is that keeps us up at night – those fears might keep us narrowly focused on the tasks in front of us, but they do not motivate us to surpass expectations or to create anything stunning or new. Terror doesn't generally inspire greatness – and yes, we are created in God's image, so greatness can still be our goal.

If the vastness and beauty of the heavens are the clue to God's character that Psalm 19 says they are, then we don't need to settle for avoiding sin and completing most tasks on time with supervision. Our Creator made us for more than that. Seen from this perspective, the law starts to look less like a prison and more like how our psalm describes it. Remembering that God is God and that we are not, taking our rest, honoring our closest relationships, telling the truth and being content

with what we have – these practices are meant to revive the soul and rejoice the heart and give light to the eyes. They're meant to free us from fear, not enslave us to it.

One wishes the religious leaders in today's Gospel could have seen that. We don't have time to dig deeply into this passage, but one brief note: We are not beholden to their interpretation of Jesus' parable either – their assumption that the only valid response to violence is more violence. We're told straight out that they're afraid, and that fear clouds their judgment. Jesus reminds them here that God finds value in those they reject, and if they can't share the fruits of the kingdom, then Jesus will give the keys to someone who can.

Which brings us back to Peter – and the story we started with. What happened to him between Holy Week and Pentecost? What gave

him the courage to boldly proclaim? Well, he had the worst night of his life. That's what happened. He failed. He failed Jesus and himself spectacularly, and Jesus called him back into service and told him to feed his sheep anyway. He gave him the keys to the kingdom of heaven anyway. Peter found out that we can really get it wrong before we get it right and that it's never too late to start again. What's more, in the resurrected Jesus, he learned that we don't need to be afraid of death anymore either. He encountered the perfect love that casts out fear, the love that takes what others have rejected and makes it the cornerstone – the foundation for something beautiful. And as for us, well – when we don't need to be afraid of rejection or failure or death, what's to stop us from being made whole? What's to stop us from greatness? Amen.



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