

# *Building Our Capacity for Trust*

Mark 4:35-41

Sermon by Dan Schrock

October 25, 2020

*<sup>35</sup>On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." <sup>36</sup>And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. <sup>37</sup>A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. <sup>38</sup>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?" <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" <sup>41</sup>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?"*  
(NRSV)

## I

I am not speaking anything new when I say that our level of collective anxiety may be higher than at any point in the last 50 years. The sources of our collective anxiety are many.

- Example: 4 million acres have burned on the west coast, with a gigafire called the "August Complex" raging in northern California.<sup>1</sup> What does such destruction tell us about climate change, and what does it portend for our future?
- Example: Among persons of African-American heritage, a collective grief has arisen over police brutality and legal injustice, which is so deep that it can hardly be expressed.<sup>2</sup>
- Example: What will happen after the November 3 election? Will the president insist on staying in office even if he loses? Will riots and protracted legal fights create uncertainty for weeks or months afterward?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/10/07/northern-california-fire-is-now-a-gigafire-a-rare-designation-for-a-blaze-that-burns-at-least-a-million-acres/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/arts/elizabeth-alexander-george-floyd-video-protests.html>

- Example: How long will Covid-19 last, and how many more people will die while leaders prevaricate? What will happen to me if I get Covid-19? Will I also die?
- Example: How many more people will lose their jobs? Will I lose my job? And if I'm unemployed, when will I be able to find a job so I can eat and pay my rent?

The wording of news headlines feed our anxieties. Have you noticed how often the headlines of news stories use the words *might*, *could*, and *may*? Here are a few illustrations.

- “A new Electoral College nightmare: We may face a constitutional crisis if either candidate dies”<sup>3</sup>
- “What a 6–3 Supreme Court Could Do”<sup>4</sup>

And then there are over-the-top headlines, which overtly urge us to be terrified:

- “The Supreme Court could kill protection for preexisting conditions. You should be terrified”<sup>5</sup>
- “If COVID-19 frightens you, you should be terrified by climate change”<sup>6</sup>

When I scan these headlines, my chest constricts; my heart beats faster; my shoulders get tense; and my fertile imagination starts spinning all sorts of awful scenarios. When you read such headlines, what happens in your body?

## II

Dealing with our collective anxieties may be one of the foremost spiritual opportunities of our time. Of course we are not the first Christians in history to be

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.salon.com/2020/10/06/a-new-electoral-college-nightmare-we-may-face-a-constitutional-crisis-if-either-candidate-dies/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/10/america-will-be-michigan-soon/616635/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.yorkdispatch.com/story/opinion/contributors/2020/09/25/op-ed-supreme-court-could-kill-protection-preexisting-conditions-you-should-terrified/3519995001/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/faith-seeking-understanding/if-covid-19-frightens-you-you-should-be-terrified-climate>

anxious. In today's story from Mark 4, the disciples get rather anxious when they go sailing with Jesus. Jesus is so exhausted from the rigors of ministry that even a nasty storm doesn't awaken him from his nap. The disciples fear the storm will drown them, so they wake Jesus up, and he obligingly tells the storm to simmer down. Then Jesus asks the disciples two questions: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

That word *faith* is one of the major words of the New Testament. The Greek word is *pistis*, which you can translate into the English words "faith," or "belief," or "trust." Any of these three words are good translations for the Greek *pistis*, but oddly, most versions of the Bible choose the word *faith*, and sometimes the word *belief*. But only rarely do they choose the word *trust*.

For many North American Christians, *faith* and *belief* refer to head knowledge. If someone says, "I believe in God the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit," that generally means they accept the theological doctrine of the Trinity. Or again if someone says, "I have faith that God raised Jesus from the dead," that usually means they accept the theology of the resurrection. When we're talking about major doctrines, the words faith and believe fit fairly well. It makes sense to use those words in that context.

But the Greek word *pistis* is about more than head knowledge and intellectual assent. It also means *trust*, and trust has more to do with inner confidence. If I say I trust my best friend to stick by me through thick and thin, it means I'm confident that she or he will act in reliable ways. My friend will listen when I need to talk. My friend will share valuable insights with me. My friend will be glad when I'm joyful and sad when I'm having a hard time. To trust someone is to feel assured they will act in ways consistent with what I know about their personality and life commitments. A key difference here is that belief and faith

happen in our heads, while trust happens in our relationships. Trust is a social and interpersonal word.

Since *trust* is a perfectly good English word to translate the Greek *pistis*, we could slightly revise Jesus' questions to the disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no trust?" This slight change in words gives the second question a different twist. When we translate it this way, Jesus is asking: Do you trust me? I'm right here with you in the boat. Do you trust God? God cares for you.

Because *pistis* can be translated as trust, we can swap out *faith* or *belief* from just about any verse in the New Testament, and insert the word *trust*. Allow me to read examples of verses that usually contain *faith* or *belief* in our English translations. Listen what happens when we use the word *trust*.

- "And now trust, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." 1 Cor. 13:13
- "When Jesus saw their trust, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" Mark 2:5
- "Therefore, since we are justified by trust, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 5:1
- "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through trust, as you are being rooted and grounded in love." Ephesians 3:17
- And then the beautiful passage in Hebrews 11. "Now trust is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . . By trust Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. . . . By trust Abraham obeyed when was called to set out for a place he was to receive as an inheritance. . . . By trust Moses was hidden by his parents for three months. . . . By trust the people [of Israel] passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land. . . . [These people] through trust conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,

quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, and won strength out of weakness. . . .”

You get the idea from this small sample of many possible examples. I think we hear something different in these biblical passages when we use the word *trust* instead of *faith* or *belief*. We hear something that’s more relational and that invites our hearts and spirits to respond to God, not just our heads. Maybe we also feel more inspired and more hopeful.

In our current context of anxiety, we may need the word *trust* more than *faith* or *belief*. These days, we who are in Christ want assurance that we can trust God. We want to live with confidence that God will work in the compound crises that currently plague us.

### III

Since *trust* is a relational word, deepening our trust in God will probably mean deepening our relationship with God, the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. To some degree, each of us will need to find our own way into a deeper relationship with God. Nobody else can do this for us; we can only do it for ourselves.

Nevertheless, we can share our stories with each other. Soon after the arrival of Covid, I began experimenting with various prayer practices to see what would help me to be less anxious and trust God more. Eventually I landed on reading a psalm every day during breakfast and praying with it. Specifically, I find a phrase or sentence in the psalm and turn it into a prayer, which I then repeat silently for 10-30 minutes. I address the prayer to God, like this:

- You yourself are my prize (Ps. 16).
- In You rests all my hope (Ps. 39).
- You are my refuge and strength, my help in trouble (Ps. 46).

- I trust in You. I shall not fear (Ps. 56).
- I fly to You for refuge (Ps. 64).

This practice of prayer has calmed me considerably. However, that's just what happens to work for me.

In Mark 4, Jesus uses a context of anxiety to help his followers trust God more. What spiritual practice builds your capacity for trust? In the turbulence of our times, what will calm your spirit and guide your heart to the heart of God?