

The Wind & the Waves: When You're Up Against Life's Challenged
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A few years back I read a book called *The Kite Runner*. The book is a fascinating tale of two young boys growing up in Afghanistan in the 1970s. One of the boys is named Amir. He's a Sunni Muslim. His dad owns a successful carpet business so they live a life of privilege. The other boy is named Hassan. He's a Shiite Muslim. His dad is part of the servant class in Afghanistan. He and his father devote their lives to tending to the needs of Amir and his family.

Despite the class distinction, the boys grow up as close friends. They play together, explore the neighborhood, and do their best to avoid the local bully. One day Hassan risks life and limb rescuing Amir from that bully. He bravely threatens to shoot out the bully's eye with a slingshot....until the bully backs down. Amir breathes a huge sigh of relief. He vows to return the favor someday. It won't be long before he has the chance.

The book gets its name from kite flying, which is a popular sport in Afghanistan, and from those who chase after the kites as they come down to the ground—kite runners. In wintertime people hold contests to see whose kite can stay airborne the longest. It's not quite as simple that, however. People do what they can to cut you off and knock your kite out of the sky.

Amir enters the contest with a sleek, custom-built, blue kite. He ends up winning the top prize. A loud cheer goes up from the crowd. As Amir lets his high flying kite descend to earth, Hassan goes kite-running into the old part of the city to retrieve it.

But there's a problem. Hassan doesn't return for the longest time. After numerous handshakes and pats on the back, Amir goes looking for his friend. He asks countless people, "Have you seen Hassan?" Everyone shakes their head *no*. Eventually Amir finds him in a dark and deserted alley. *Uh oh!* He's trapped by the bully and a couple of his buddies. Amir freezes. What should he do? Should he play it safe or should he recklessly dive into the melee? The longer he hesitates, the more Amir is paralyzed by fear. He knows he should go to Hassan's defense, but he cannot summon the courage. So he stays in the shadows and bites his fist while his friend is brutally assaulted.

After the bully and his gang leave, Amir approaches his friend. Hassan is limping badly. Amir puts his arm around him. He offers to help him get home. Hassan, who is clutching the blue kite in his arms, has a look of deep sadness in his eyes. *Why do people have to be so cruel?* he wonders. There's an awkward silence between the two boys. Amir isn't sure if his friend knows what he did or not, but Amir knows, and their friendship will never be quite the same again.

Have you ever been in a similar situation—where your heart was telling you *go*, but fear was telling you *no*. That's what we're talking about today. Last week Pastor Shelley got us out of the boat. She even had us taking a few tentative steps of faith. Things were going along smoothly on this water-walking adventure. When we take a few more steps, however, suddenly our footing feels less secure. We begin to notice the wind and the waves. We're staring the neighborhood bully square in the face, and we're paralyzed by fear.

Do you know what the number one command is in the Bible? It's not *love one another*. It's not *pray with ceasing*. It's not *worship God above everything else*. The number one command—by far—is *fear not*. This command shows up 366 times, one for every day of the year, plus an extra for leap year. We can probably guess why. Because fear can be such a big part of our lives. Because fear can be a big reason we're tempted to avoid doing what God asks us to do.

Fears come in all shape and sizes. Some fear is a natural response to danger. The water is deep, the cliff is high, the enemy is strong. Stay back! Or if need be, run! This kind of fear is a good thing: it keeps a child away from a snarling dog and keeps us from driving recklessly on icy roads.

Other fear is more of a learned behavior. We don't want to look foolish. Public speaking ranks right ahead of death as the number one thing we're afraid of. For shy Lutherans, you might as well add to the list: inviting someone to church, asking people for money, or my personal favorite, heading out onto the dance floor with everyone watching.

Whatever our fears happen to be, the biblical command *fear not* seems to suggest that we don't have to be afraid, that fear is not our only option. No, with help from God, many of our fears can be faced and maybe even overcome.

In the lesson we read earlier, Isaiah is preaching to the exiles in Babylon. They're intrigued by his message about returning home, but they think it sounds too good to be true.

After all, they've been stuck in Babylon for a lifetime. It's been so long they don't even remember what home is like. They're trapped in their fears. Then God comes along and speaks to them through the prophet Isaiah: "*Fear not*," God says. "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. *Fear not*. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. *Fear not*. You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you. *Fear not*. Even though you're far away from home, I haven't forgotten a single one of you. I will say to the north and the south and the east and the west: 'Give them up. They are mine. I'm going to take them home.'" It comes down to this: Isaiah tells the exiles not to fear, because fear will sink a person faster than anything.

We know what that's like. A middle-aged man feels like joining a small group Bible study, but fear holds him back—*what if I say something dumb*.. A woman feels trapped in an abusive marriage—but fear keeps her from seeking help. A young woman feels pressured by her parents to follow a course for her life that she clearly doesn't want—but fear prevents her from speaking up. An elderly man is afraid of dying, but he's never admitted it to anyone—he's afraid of what others might think.

I wonder, how often do our hearts say *go*, but our fears say *no*? I wonder too, how steep a price do we pay for giving in to our fears?

Let me give you a simple example. A three-year-old girl stands by the side of a pool. "Jump!" her father says, with open arms. "Don't be afraid. You can trust me. Jump!"

In that moment, the three-year-old is a bundle of inner conflict. On the one hand, everything inside her is screaming to stay put. The water is deep, cold, and dangerous. She's never done this before. She can't swim. What if something were to go wrong? On the other hand, that's her dad in the water. He's bigger and stronger than she is. He's been trustworthy up to this point. He seems to be quite confident about the outcome. Her heart says *go*, but her fear says *no*.

So what happens to us when we say *no*? The American Psychological Association did a study of people who were held back by their fears. They were looking at folks who were gifted, attractive, and well-liked, but who were lacking in basic self-esteem. Many of these people had accomplished a great deal in life and were surrounded by people who admired them. What the research found is that self-esteem largely boils down to one issue: When you come to a difficult situation, do you face it head on and take action? Or do you avoid it?

If you take action, you get a surge of confidence. *I did it. I took on a hard challenge and did it.* The flip side is avoidance. It's Amir hiding in the shadows. Give in to that fear often enough, suggests the study, and it will chip away at your self-esteem.

Friends, what fears of yours need facing these days? Maybe there's some bully you need to stand up to. Maybe you need to wade feet first into a difficult task you've been putting off? Maybe you need to have a heart-to-heart with someone, make a phone call you've been avoiding, volunteer for something that could take you out of your comfort zone.

When you do this—when you face up to your fears—you'll get a little stronger inside. You'll feel better about yourself. And you'll be reminded of something we so often forget: life is hard. Patience is hard, marriage is hard, friendship is hard, having an illness is hard, being a mom is hard, going to work is hard, being a Christian is hard. But here's the deal: we believe in a God who specializes in hard times, using every last one of them as an opportunity for us to grow.

So, what has your heart been saying lately: *go* or *no*? Remember, Jesus is standing there on the water. He's holding out his arms and saying, "Trust me. Why are you so afraid? I'll be there to catch you if you sink." He's saying, "Every time you face your fears, every time you put your trust in me, every time you go out on a limb in faith, you will have a chance to grow."

And most importantly of all, he's saying, *Fear not, I am with you. I have called you by name, you are mine.* Amen.