Jim Hollis says that there are two big life threats that we carry within us: fear and lethargy. Here is what he says:

“Every morning we rise to find two gremlins at the foot of the bed. The one named Fear says, ‘The world is too big for you, too much. You are not up to it. Find a way to slip-slide away again today.’ And the one named Lethargy says, ‘Hey, chill out. You’ve had a hard day. Turn on the telly, surf the Internet, have some chocolate. Tomorrow’s another day.’ Those perverse twins munch on our souls every day. No matter what we do today, they will turn up again tomorrow. Over time, they usurp more days of our lives than those to which we may lay fair claim. More energy is spent in any given day on managing fear through unreflective compliance, or avoidance, than any other value. While it is natural to expend energy managing our fears, the magnitude of this effort on a daily basis cannot be overemphasized.”

He goes on but I want to stop there.

Those of you who are reading Hollis’ book, “Living An Examined Life” know that he is really big on the role of questions in his work. He stresses that there is really no way to live the examined life without asking some very intense questions of ourselves and about ourselves on a very regular basis.
At some level you are already doing that or you would not be here today. What brought you here? What are you looking for? How do the answers to those questions connect with messages or wounds you got in the formative years of your life and living?

We all got scripts of one kind or the other handed to us in our young lives. How free from or guided by those are we now? How even aware of them are we?

We all got wounded in the early years of our lives. To some degree we all felt overwhelmed by and not adequate to life. We all experienced abandonment of one kind or another. Most all of these wounds were delivered to us quite unintentionally by parents who loved us the best that knew how or were capable of at the time. Of course, some people have experienced horrendous wounds in both childhood and from life in general.

I had not read Hollis’ book when I decided last year to be guided in the construction of these talks by the questions Jesus asked.

Just as Buddha is alleged to have said that he is not the moon but only a finger pointing to the moon, I take Jesus to be a candle flame and not the source of light itself. If you or I had been born in India or China or Japan or Africa, the way we would conceptualize and pose questions about mystery and meaning would cause us to use other religious and symbolic language. However, using the questions of Jesus offers me an excellent
opportunity to do my part in contributing to religious and spiritual literacy.

I will remind you that according to the narratives considered authoritative in the Christian tradition Jesus is asked 183 questions. He answers only three of them. I wish that this information alone were enough to derail those who think that it is religion’s primary job to supply answers or to give people in positions of authority and power to tell others how to live and order their lives.

Jesus himself asked a lot of questions. Just like the questions of any good spiritual teacher the questions he asked are designed to reposition people. That is to say, to pick them up from one place and put them someplace else. The questions are asked to make people aware of their unconscious biases, to break them out of what I refer to as dualistic mind, to challenge how they think about God or Divine Presence, how they think about the world in which they live. Jesus wanted to present people with new and creative possibilities.

The question of Jesus that this talk is built on is, “Why are you afraid?” Or, perhaps more accurately, “Why are you terrified?”

Before getting into the specifics about where this particular question is asked I want to say that this question or some form of it is asked by him almost from the beginning to the end of the narratives told about him. And the declarative form of this
question is not only in the Jesus narratives but throughout the entire Jewish/Christian story.

The words “Fear not!” are found over and over in the Hebrew Scriptures. When the early Jesus followers were building a parable about the birth of Jesus they told a story of angels in the heavens singing for joy songs that said, “Fear not! For behold I bring you tidings of great joy!” And at the end the resurrection stories also tell of messengers from God who said, “Don’t be afraid.”

The question that I am using today comes from another parable told, not by Jesus, but by his followers of a time when Jesus and some of his followers got in a boat to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Of course, if someone takes the Bible literally, this is just a travelog. But, if you take this as a parable, it is a story of just one more time when Jesus crosses from one place to another, breaking barriers and transgressing borders. He was not building barriers and barricades. In this particular story the boat is beset by a storm. It is such a storm that the disciples are afraid that they are going to drown. There are terrified. In case the analogy is lost on anyone: are we in storm seas today? Nationally? Globally? Perhaps you are personally. Frightened?

While this is going on, this Jesus character is taking a nap.
So his followers wake him up and say, “Hey, man. We thought you were going to take care of us. Don’t you care at all that we are about to drown?”

In the story Jesus stills the storm. This is what is called a “nature miracle.” You remember that we spent a lot of time talking about miracles. One of the five fundamentals of Christian Fundamentalism is that “the miracles of Jesus are literally true.” If you want to or need to believe this story literally, that is your option. But, then, what is the meaning of this story? If you read it, Jesus asks the question before he calms the storm. While all hell is breaking loose around these folks and some of them are sure they are going down for good, Jesus says, “Why are you terrified?

This is such a brilliant question.

“Why are you afraid?”

We are afraid. I am.

Thomas Merton wrote that fear lies not only behind all of our personal and relational problems but also behind every crisis in the world. All of the addictions from which we suffer are fear management systems. Fear is the root of war. Just as certitude is the opposite of faith, fear is the opposite of love. Because we are afraid we put and keep our defenses up. And, many people have legitimate reasons to do so.
I mentioned a moment ago how all of us get wounded growing up. We are told that the world is too much for us. That we are not big enough or good enough. Or, expectations are put on us that are absolutely overwhelming. I remember a time when I was in graduate school and was visiting friends of mine. I had no children but they did and we all thought, at that time, that it was funny that the Dad would say to his little boy, “Brian, you can be any kind of doctor you want to be when you grow up.”

When Jesus says to me, “Why are you so frightened?” I want to say back to him, “How much time you got? I’ll tell you.”

“When you say to me that if I want to have life I have to give it up, that scares the daylight out of me. I’m scared something will happen to one of my children or grandchildren. I’m scared about the direction this country I love seems to be going. When you invite me to follow you and I see you hanging on the cross, that’s kind of scary.”

I have been privileged for decades now to sit with people in a personal counseling relationship and I can tell you that people are scared of all sorts of things: spiders, speaking in public, plane crashes, heights, poverty, illness, unemployment, fire, hurricanes, snakes and, most of all death.

I personally do not believe that Jesus himself was fearless. He felt fear. But, he did not live in fear. It is like when the Dali
Lama was once asked, “Do you ever get angry?” He said, “Yes. But it is not a problem.” I think this is what was true for Jesus was and he is saying, “Don’t live in fear. Live in love.”

Our movement through life is just that - movement. Our whole being moves and with it go the values that we truly embrace. Or, that embrace us. My desire is to move with peace, love, joy, patience and humility. Not fear. Fear slows our movement. As we journey toward the “not-yet” fear will not just stop us in our tracks. It will lead us into the swamplands.

One of the reasons I want to contribute to religious literacy is because there are many people in high places in organized religion, I’m speaking now only about organized Christianity, who say and implement some of the dumbest things because they are religiously illiterate and, certainly, biblically illiterate. One of the strangest claims involves this business of miracles.

You will remember that I have talked about the five fundamentals of Christian Fundamentalism:

the Bible is literally true,
the miracles Jesus is said to have performed are literally true,
the literal nature of the virgin birth,
the literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus,
and, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus’ death on the cross.
I’ve talked about all of these in some depth in the past but let’s look again, and briefly, at the Fundamentalist claim about the literal nature of miracles.

One claim the Fundamentalists make is that the miracles said to be performed by Jesus are proof of his divinity. This is a dangerous circular argument. Only the divine Son of God could perform miracles. And, if he is the divine Son of God he could perform miracles.

You know that there are miracles performed by other people in the Bible and they are not said to be divine. Most of both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures are free of miracles. In the Book of Daniel which is the last book in the Hebrew collection to be written, it is not the last in the collection, there are some pretty amazing stories told. These stories are the nature of folk tales told about people who were faithful to God and who got rewarded for their faithfulness. There is Shadrach, Meschach and Abenego who, though thrown into the fiery furnace, escaped harm. Then, there is Daniel who is thrown into the lion’s den and no harm comes to him.

There are no miracle stories in Psalms or Proverbs or Ecclesiastes or the Song of Solomon. In the Christian Scriptures Paul has no miracles in his letters. There are none in the other epistles. Even as fanciful as the book of Revelation is there are no stories of anyone doing anything miraculous.
There are only three places in the entire Jewish-Christian Scriptures were miracles seem to play a role at all. These three places are wrapped around people who played key roles in the development of the Jewish faith story - and their successors.

These three places are gathered around Moses, the founder of the Jewish nation and the giver of the law; around Elijah, the founder of the prophet movement - you have heard the phrase “the law and the prophets” - and around Jesus.

The ability to perform miracles, though not attributed to many in the Bible, do surround Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha, Jesus and some of his Apostles.

You are aware that the first people to put a narrative about Jesus together were his Jewish followers. Trust me, they weren’t Methodists. It was the Jewish way of story-telling to go back into their history and borrow tales from the past to enhance the image of Jesus. Indeed, in several of the miraculous events in the Jesus story Moses and Elijah appear. The purpose of this was to demonstrate that Jesus had transcended the greatness of these two heroes in the Jewish story. I would think that any scholar of the Bible could not avoid seeing the connections between the miracle stories told about both Moses and Elijah and those told about Jesus.

The Moses saga is a great and wonderful story. The God of Abraham works through Moses to do wondrous things and these
things are done in the world of nature. The first miracle story is
this: Moses was out tending his father-in-law’s sheep when he
sees a bush that is burning but the fire does not consume the
bush. He says to himself, “What’s going on here? I can’t believe
this! Amazing! Why doesn’t the bush burn up?” God calls to
him out of the burning bush saying, “Moses! Moses!” And
Moses says, “I’m right here.” Then God says, “Don’t come any
closer. Remove your sandals from your feet. You’re standing on
holy ground.” (This is Peterson’s translation of Exodus 3)

This power over nature highlights the Moses story in the book of
Exodus. God equips Moses to do some amazing feats. He can
throw his walking staff to the ground and it turns into a snake.
He can stick his hand into his robe and when he removes it, it is
diseased. Sticks it back in again and it is clean. Then this theme
is continued in the stories of the plagues that God sends against
the Egyptians all in an effort to persuade Pharaoh to release the
Jewish people from slavery. It is a really gruesome story ending
with God killing the first born male child of every Egyptian
household.

This, as you know, is followed by the splitting of the Red Sea so
that the Israelites can cross to safety but the sea closes just in
time to drown all the Egyptians.

I could go on and on with so-called nature miracles from the
story of Moses. Let’s just say for now that they are a significant
factor in the story.
One of the categories of miracles attributed to Jesus is that of performing miracles over nature. Jesus could control things like wind and water. All of the nature miracles attributed to Jesus appear to be expanded Moses stories. They are not told as factual truths. They serve an interpretive purpose. These stories about Jesus exist to say, “In Jesus we have met a Divine Presence even greater than the one our ancestors encountered in Moses.” They were trying to make the story they told about Jesus big enough to embrace the wonder and the mystery that they had experienced in Jesus.

The early Jesus followers held on to the memory and teachings of Jesus as both their anchor and their compass. That is what enabled them to endure they storms they were going through.

The nature miracles in the biblical record, as well as other types of miracle stories, are not historical events in which the laws of physics were broken. Those who created these stories knew this. What happened is that the Enlightenment came along causing duality to engulf the world with so-called reason. This caused people, especially Western world people, to misinterpret these stories and take them as literal events that occurred.

People who are lodged in duality seem to be able to ask about these types of stories the objective question, “Did this event really happen?”
Those who are committed to believing the Bible at a literal level and to asserting that Jesus was a divine person unlike the rest of us say, “Yes.” These people are uncritical traditionalists, unthinking fundamentalists and embrace a religion of certainty.

Those who answer, “No, this did not literally happen,” become the skeptics, members of the church alumni society, even atheists.

Both of these answers miss the point because neither position reflects an ability to understand the tradition of story-telling in which Jesus lived, the Jewish tradition.

We will deal with other kinds of miracle stories as we go forward.

One of the reasons I deal with this religious, biblical, Jesus literacy material is because so very, very much damage of all kinds is committed out of biblical, religious and Jesus stupidity. It is impossible to live in the West or in this country without knowing about Jesus. It is entirely possible to go your whole life without knowing Jesus. It is also possible to go your whole life without knowing the person who is living your life - but that is another topic.

These Jesus narratives were not written with us in mind.
The idiots who tell you that they know when the world is going to end because of their interpretation of verses in the book of Daniel or in the book of Revelation are exactly that, idiots.

It is an inability to read the Bible both in its context and accurately that has led not only to the debacle about the LGBTQ+ issue in organized Christianity today but also to the blurring of a definite line between what goes under the banner of Evangelical Christianity and our current political fiasco.

What was life like for Jesus? What was life like for those who were attracted to his message?

None of them thought about chronology like we do. They were Jews and lived in and with a Jewish worldview and calendar. Nobody had clocks. But in the years, as we would count them looking back, 80, 100, 115, 250; what was life like? It was not smooth sailing. I promise you that.

What was the message of Jesus?

Remember, he was not friendly with either the religious or political systems of his time. He didn’t get in bed with Herod and he didn’t become bishop of the Jerusalem Annual Conference.
He talked about a plan he had for a new religious and social order called “the empire of God.” This was in contrast to the empire of Caesar.

Here is what I have learned about what Jesus taught about what he called the rule or empire of God:

It is not under our control.
It shows up where and when we least expect it.
It disrupts business as usual.
It is a rule of justice and forgiveness. Not a punitive justice but a justice that makes things right.

You like giving up control? Or, rather, the illusion of control? We really have control over almost nothing.

Research is now clearly showing that one of the marks of a longer and physically healthier life is having and practicing some sort of spiritual faith. Where is that in your daily life? Where and how do you feel connected to Divine Presence? Are we hoping for and open to the disruptions of love and justice into our daily actions and assumptions? Are we actively working for both the forgiveness and justice that we know Jesus taught was to be extended to all people everywhere?

I heard Richard Rohr say once something that so resonated with me the moment he said it. He said, “More trouble is caused in
this world by people who take offense than by people who cause offense.”

When Jesus asks, “Why are you terrified?” I have easy answers.

I grew up being terrified of Jesus. The church of my childhood, not even aware what they were doing, convinced me that the message of Jesus was, “I’m going to go away and when you least expect it, I’m coming back and if you are not measuring up, I’m going to burn you in hell.”

Jesus never said that. Not even close.

We are frightened today are we not? Many people who claim to follow Jesus are offended by a God who loves everybody and who asks us to do the same. I think it is funny, sad but funny, that many people are frightened for the light of scholarship to shine upon what part of their knowledge of the Bible is in the dark.

Here is a suggestion for your spiritual practice: work with what offends you. Because the Christian religion has been made into such a personal and private matter in this country, the church, the voice of Jesus, has been robbed of its true prophetic power. Many believe that being a follower of Jesus is not just a personal matter but also a private affair.
Fears of all sorts keep us paralyzed but the fact is that Jesus called for a relationship with the Sacred that went far beyond personal piety. Our very personal God demands justice done in the world and calls those who relate to this Divine Presence to struggle for justice in the world. No matter how stormy the seas, don’t be afraid. Our claim must not be that God is on our side but have practices and behaviors that show our earnest desire to be on God’s side. The “God-is-on-our-side” mentality leads inevitably to triumphalism, self-righteousness, bad theology and dangerous foreign policy. Working to be on God’s side leads to much healthier things.

My current understanding of what it means to be a Christian is this: to be a Christian is seeking to have a growing relationship with the God of Jesus and having the faith and trust that this relationship will not leave us unchanged.

I believe that anyone who seeks to “believe in” and “follow” the God made known to us in Jesus must look at both the personal and political decisions we participate in by asking whether they enhance human life, human dignity and human rights; whether they strengthen family values; whether they strengthen family life and protect children; whether they promote racial reconciliation and support gender equality; whether they serve peace and social justice; and whether they advance the common good rather than only individual, national, and special interests.
I know that some of you have had crushingly negative experiences with Christianity. Many people over the centuries have. I am thinking of things like the Crusades, the New England Witch Hunts, the subjugation of indigenous people in the name of mission, the religious sanction of slavery, the regressive sexism and heavy-handed patriarchy, the regressive anti-intellectual elements, the bombing of abortion clinics, the pedophile priest scandal of the Catholic Church and coverups of sexual abuse in Protestantism, the sanctification and perpetuation of violence and on and on.

Distorted Christianity is not the same as seeking to immerse ourselves in the originality of Jesus’ teachings. There is such a wholeness in it that we have to return again and again to it as we will.

Listen carefully to this for the realization of this, says Richard Rohr, can be an earthquake in your brain, a hurricane in your heart, a Copernican revolution in your mind, a monumental shift in consciousness. Here it is: Your life is not about you. You are about Life. You are an instant of a Universal. The One Life that some call God is living itself in you, through you, as you. You have never been separate from Sacred Mystery except in your mind. This realization won’t remove the fear but it will release you from anxiety. Now we can live with gratitude for already being where we always wanted to be.
I’ll say that again in another way. Three simple phrases. They aren’t religious language but they are, I believe, profoundly spiritual.

Everything changes.

Everything and everyone is connected.

Pay attention.

Not to the storm but to the values of peace, love, joy, patience and humility.

They constitute, no matter how rough the seas, a trustworthy anchor and compass when smooth sailing is denied us.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.