

Fear
(or Things That Go Bump in the Night)

OK let's get real. This is one of those easier-to-say-than-to-do topics. . I say: "Jesus says 'Fear not,'" and we all nod and smile and move on to the closing prayer. We all know he said it and said it and said it. So he must have known it was a big deal He must have known it was a threat. He must have known it wakes us up, haunts us, immobilizes us, even makes us sick. But still it is such an overwhelming, life destroying force. And there are so many different ways to be afraid. There's being afraid of all kinds of things that might happen to us, that we might do wrong, that might get us into trouble. There's fear of being called out, yelled at, screwing up, dropping the ball, failing the test, doing something stupid or, even worse in these days, doing something stupid caught on video and viewed from Hong Kong to Holland. There's dark and haunting fears of illness and aging and not being able to pay the mortgage. There's fears of hurricanes and blizzards and heatwaves. There are fears of things falling on our heads, or heart attacks or one of a thousand maladies for which we TV ads every five minutes. There's fear of a country that no longer seems like the one we thought we lived in. And of course there is fear (or is it terror?) of this pandemic and just how bad things are and can be. You can keep a list this week of every time you are afraid of something and see that the range is astounding.

Basically, we are afraid of something, either overtly or introvertly, most of the time. It is revealed in our language, in our paranoia, in our inability to act. We look at the weather report, the stock market, the endless brain battering, heart wrenching news. When we were younger we were afraid we wouldn't get into college and then afraid to go if we did. Later, we

are afraid we won't get the job and afraid to go if we do. We are afraid we will never marry and afraid to get married. When we are older every ache portends the Memorial Service which we plan on a regular basis. . And throughout our lives we are afraid of failure and success, of losing and winning, and of being loved—or not. That is a big one. Enough? We claim that we are not afraid of being dead but we sure as heck are afraid of dying. And to put the candle on this already incendiary cake we are afraid Jesus is not coming and afraid that he is.

Before we move on I must confess that I have been in a constant, low-grade state of existential fear for quite a while now. Oh and just layer on top of all of that that we are not afraid, we are terrified, absolutely terrified, of the unknown possibilities of the next few months of our united lives. OK. Let me catch my breath. I thought I should be honest about all of this before I get preachy and just assure you with all the ministerial majesty I can muster that “even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death I am with you.” But sometimes we just don't feel it.

So let me just take a moment to be honest and personal smf repeat a story several of you have heard. The truth is I am really frightened of flying. When I get on the airplane, I am in a state of terror. I want to be a sophisticated traveler. Cavalier. Jaded, even. “I fly ALL the time.” I don't want to be this pale, shallow breathing, palm sweating, sissy. So I try every trick in the book. I wait until the last minute to get on the plane. I do deep breathing to the count of four. In. Out. In. Out. I use a meditation tape. I distract myself with hand held computer games and magazine pictures of Matt Damon. I console myself with statistics. I am safer here than in my car. I am safer here than in my car. Follow the swinging watch.... And, even in my petrified state, the humor is not lost on me. If the plane DOES go down

the seat cushion upon which I am sitting—you know that cushion that is the size of a box of Wheaties—becomes my flotation device. Now there's a comforting thought! Have you seen the Atlantic Ocean lately? Not to mention that we are flying over things that look a lot like the icebergs that took down the Titanic. No sweat! I have this cushion.

I wasn't afraid of flying until I flew through a thunderstorm and experienced what life would be like if I was an active ping-pong ball. And even now, I realize, as strange as it may seem, it is not the crash that I fear. It is not being able to get off the plane when I want to. So I sit there on my flotation device breathing recycled air, and I must deal with what fear feels like, and I do not like it. It does not feel good. It does all kinds of strange things to my body. Jaw clenches. Muscles tighten. Hands grip. Breathing quickens. Eyes glaze. Fear!

So now that I have entertained you for about a half an hour I need to face up to the heart of the matter. How do we bring our Christian faith to all of this? How do we bring our understanding of Jesus' continued assurances to this? Let's try. Being afraid is as old as being human. It is the famous flight or fright mechanism programmed into us for survival. It is that message inside of us that says: The tiger is coming. Run stupid! Our physiology is designed to help us run. Blood automatically flows to our arms and legs. Run stupid! But, in modern times, when that message kicks in, we frequently cannot run. Here comes Attila, my boss. Run stupid! Here comes my combative sister-in-law. Run stupid! Here comes my final exam in calculus. Run stupid! But alas, we cannot run, and so the fear turns within. And that, as we and our gastroenterologists know, is not a good thing.

“When you have a fear response it is time to take stock and evaluate whether the fear is helpful...or hurtful.”¹ Helpful fears are the things we should be afraid of. The lightening bolt. The speeding, weaving driver. The hot stove. The gun wielding intruder. The snarling dog. That’s one kind of fear—the more primitive, self preserving kind. Those are very rational fears—fears of things that can do us in. Fear can be, we all know, life saving. Helpful fear is fear that responds to a real threat. It is that feeling that seizes you when you know danger is imminent and you must act.

Hurtful fear, on the other hand, is the fear of something that is not a real threat.² Some people call it FEAR—false expectations appearing real--the list of things that we believe will do us in. This is the kind of fear that we act out in the theatre in our mind; these are the scenes we play over and over and over again in our heads. Thinking about them is often more frightening than doing them. It is our anticipation of that which will terrify us, harm us, embarrass us. Take public speaking, for example. I read somewhere that people are more afraid of public speaking than they are of death. Hurtful fears are the ones that play on the tapes that run in our brains, the ones that prevent us from living fully, from doing the things we would love to do. Each of us here this morning has a hurtful fear. A lot of them have to do with not measuring up. I am not pretty enough, smart enough, worthy enough. This is the kind of fear that is just below the surface as we sit at our desks at work and fantasize that a group of co-workers will break in one day, surround us, and say: “This person is really, really DUMB. Incompetent.” And we will sit there, metaphorically stripped, and everyone will see that we really don’t know what we are doing. Hurtful fears include fear of failure.

¹ [Http://www.untaming.com/archive7html](http://www.untaming.com/archive7html)

² Ibid, 1.

Fear of success. Fear of commitment. Fear of losing. Fear of winning. Fear of not having enough. Fear of aging. Please feel free to take your pick or add your own. Come to think of it, if we work on it just a little, we can be afraid of something every moment of every day.

Like sex and greed, fear sells. Listen to those obscene promos for the evening news. “Elderly woman terrorized in Parkville.” “Fire traps four in Hampden.” If you are not afraid when you wake up in the morning, wait a few minutes! The radio and newspaper and TV will take care of that. And this very fear that is sold so effectively can cause us to react in ways that are completely irrational, retributive, extremely dangerous, and not based at all on our higher Christian calling: love. In those cases we do, indeed, often have nothing to fear but fear itself. And we especially have to fear those who know how to lead by fear, manipulate by fear, how to use the fear of others to push through their own agendas. Perhaps that is why the Bible so often says: fear not. Do not be afraid. Fear.

Those biblical injunctions affirm what fear can do to us. Fear seizes us, controls us. Remember what fear feels like, what it does to our bodies, to our minds, to our spirits, to our ability to breathe, to laugh, to think, to create. It is interesting to remember what happens to anyone who is in a state of constant fear. No wonder the Bible says so much about fear. The word fear appears hundreds of times in scripture.

All that we have said about fear so far is present in the startling story of the transfiguration. This is how the story goes in Matthew. He sets it on a high mountain where so many major biblical events take place. The characters form an inner circle: Peter, James, John. They ascend the mountain, and they experience an extraordinary vision. Jesus is changed before them. His face shines like the sun. His clothes becomes dazzling

white. Now THAT is when I would start to tremble. But Matthew does not say they are afraid. Not yet. Next Moses and Elijah join the party and start talking to Jesus. Hmmmm. Still, Matthew does NOT tell us that Peter and James and John are afraid. In fact Peter seems really in control. He gets into the spirit of things. “Lord, it is good that we are here.” This is good stuff. He sees Jesus turn into a spotlight. He sees two dead prophets show up. And what does Peter say? This is good. I’ll go to Krispy Kremes and get us all some donuts. And when I come back I’ll pitch three tents. We can spend the night. Wouldn’t you all be catatonic or hyperventilating or howling or hiding behind a tree or rolling down the mountain or just plain fainting by this time? Of course you would. But the point is that Matthew does not tell us that either of these things make the disciples afraid. Not yet.

But here’s the interesting part. Look at verse six. While Peter is still speaking this cloud rolls in. It covers them, overshadows them envelops them. Matthew writes: “While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said: “This is my Son...” Ok, now. Now. Here’s what is easy to miss in this story. The transfiguration did not frighten them. The appearance of Moses and Elijah did not frighten them. Not even the appearance of the cloud. But this voice from the cloud: “...when the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.” Well I guess so. Overcome. Frozen. Immobilized. Scared to death. Now that’s more like it. I would have been in that state from the beginning, but the disciples saved their true fear for that which should drive them to the ground: the voice and presence of Almighty God. And so should we.

Yet even in response to this presence, Jesus does a remarkable thing. He touches them. He touches them. So often, Jesus just speaks. But this is

different. Jesus touches them and says: “Get up. Do not be afraid.” I think that the touch here is very important. Think about it. When you are afraid, you need to be comforted, physically reassured. A child who is afraid needs to be touched. Scooped up in your arms. Rocked. Held. An adult who is afraid needs to be touched, gently on the hand, perhaps. Or an arm around the shoulder. A patient who is afraid needs to be touched. Touch, sometimes, is more truthful than words. The fear reaction is physical and needs a physical intervention.

Next, after the touch, Matthew reports that Jesus says two things. Get up. Do not be afraid. Echoing all the biblical assurances that have come before him. Echoing God’s voice to Abram: “Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield....” (Genesis 15:1). Echoing the voice of Moses to the children of Israel: “Do not be afraid....” (Exodus 20:20). Echoing the voice of Isaiah: “Lift up your voice with strength...lift it up, and do not fear....” (Is 40:9) Over and over again in Hebrew Scriptures we read. Fear not. Do not be afraid.

As we move to the Gospels we hear the angel say to Mary: “fear not.” Again, the angels say to the shepherds: “Do not be afraid.” And through his story he says fear not, Simon Peter. You will not sink. Fear not, Jairus, your daughter lives. Do not be afraid, little flock. And with the authority of all that has come before, Jesus says again to his three dear disciples, do not be afraid. He affirms all that has come before. He foreshadows all that will be said after him. Get up. Do not be afraid. Our God is a God that says: Do not be afraid. I am your God, and I am a God of love.

Our world is rocked by fear. Fears of things that go bump in our personal nights. Fears of illness. Of being left alone. Of not having enough money. Of people who look differently than we do. Fears of having someone

figure out that we really aren't that smart. Of someone seeing us as we truly are and not loving us. Fears not so much of growing old as losing power and grace and control. Fears, ultimately, of walking through the valley of the shadow. Facing fear is an inevitable and intrinsic part of our journey. Let's get real!

Most of the great things that have been done in great moments of history, or just in the lives of common women and men, have been done when people have felt touched, have risen up, and have faced fear. How do you think the people of Birmingham felt as they faced police dogs and fire hoses? How do you think soldiers felt on D-Day? How do you think women felt who, in the face of social exile, fought for their right to vote? How do you think martyrs felt as they faced the flames? How do you think the abused woman felt when she finally walked out and closed the door behind her? How do you think Jesus felt as he prayed in the garden? How do you think any person feels when they know that it is finally their time to feel God's hand, to rise up, and to fear not? I don't imagine that most of what we would call great or true or brave has been done without someone overcoming fear.

The answer to it all is in God's word, in our taking it in, believing it, relying on it, trusting it, knowing that it is indeed greater than fear. It doesn't always work. But even when we are scared to death under it all God is there, with us, in the valley of the shadow, helping us get to the warmth, the sun, the peace, the assurance, the love. Today, let's save our fear for what matters. Let's not sweat the small stuff. Let's be open to the touch of Jesus. Let's believe that "...there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18) And so believing, even if we are a little afraid, let's get up and

face our fears. And maybe, just maybe, then, we can help someone else face theirs.

Reverend Sharon Smith, The Gathering of Baltimore, October 25th, 2020