

No Fear!

I've been thinking this week about what I'm afraid of. I have a fear of falling from high places; bathophobia is the technical term or acrophobia, which is simply a fear of high places. I think I must have always had this – I don't remember climbing a lot of trees as a child and I would certainly have never climbed that tall tree at Cascade Meadows that a couple of you are famous for. It started becoming a problem for me in college, though, when I was in a theatre program in which we were all encouraged to try our hands at all aspects of production and support. I'd done some lighting work in high school and had even worked professionally for a couple of summers as a light tech, so I thought I'd give lighting design a whirl. I think I would have done ok, had the lighting positions in Hamman Hall at Rice University all been serviced by catwalks. But because Hamman had been built as a lecture hall and only later retrofitted as a theatre, the main front lighting positions could only be reached by using a huge A-frame ladder with an extension. And because of the tiered seating in the Hall, the ladder could only be used by putting one side on one level and the other side on another level and having someone sit on the lower rungs of the higher level to keep the thing from tipping over when someone ascended. For the hanging and strike of the lights, I could get away with sending a crew member up the dreadful thing but for focus, a lighting designer was expected to mount the ladder and handle the delicate work him or herself. I only designed one show in Hamman Hall, although I did pick up some money in seminary by advising a local church on their installation of a new lighting system, all while standing with both feet on the ground! In more recent times, I've experienced some sweat-popping vertigo while driving in the mountains along twisty, turning roads, which makes Stevens Pass a difficult drive for me.

I wouldn't call it arachnophobia, but I also have a healthy distaste of spiders. This issue is firmly grounded in fact for me. When I was a small boy, still wearing pajamas with feet, my mother hung a pair of my freshly-laundered pjs out to dry one fine Florida day and a brown recluse found its way into them. When my foot was inserted into the pajamas that night, the spider bit and I was dreadfully sick for a time. Now, I know that spiders are awfully useful in keeping down more noxious insects and that they have their rightful place in God's Creation but that rightful place is not inside my house, car or office. I can usually restrain myself enough to usher them outside without undue force but it is always with a shudder and sometimes, even fond memories of E.B. White's Charlotte and her magical web cannot prevent me from just plain flattening them.

As fears go, these are relatively mild and benign, except for their effects on a few unfortunate spiders. But in recent years, I have become more and more aware of the use of fear as a political and commercial tool and the effects of these fears can be more far-reaching and malevolent. Many commercials and advertisements play on the common human fear of not fitting in. They establish false standards for how our hair should look, how our teeth should look, what our body shape should be, how we should smell, what we should eat and drink, and warn us, sometimes subtly and sometimes not, that if we do not adhere to these standards we will be outside the norm, unable to join the group, find love or even happiness. Teenagers, who are already dealing with changes in their appearance over which they have little or no control, are particularly susceptible to these false messages and the result has been a lowering of self-esteem in this vulnerable group, leading to desperate behavior and even suicide.

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Commerce and politics also play on a fear upon which I touched last week: that, in spite of the fact that the United States is still the richest country in the world with one of the highest average standards of living, somehow we do not have enough. There is a never-ending push for us to feel the need to have more money, better investments, a sounder plan. The fear-driven result is that those who make business decisions or who are in a position as stockholders to affirm them are continually pursuing gains to the short-term bottom-line, without sufficient thought either for long-term strategies or for the human consequences of those short-term strategies of layoff, furlough, “right-sizing” and other cost-cutting shibboleths. This fear of somehow losing what we have come to regard as our God-given right to be the kids on the block with the most toys has led us into some pretty awful national decisions as well. We have been led to believe that our treasured lifestyles are dependent upon the steady flow of petroleum products and so we press ahead with drilling and exploration that threaten land, water and air, despite growing evidence that our overuse of petro-chemicals is slowly poisoning us and our planet. The United States has been to war now twice in the Middle East, primarily on behalf of the interests of Big Oil, and we continue a war in Afghanistan that the most cursory review of the history of that country would tell us is doomed to failure. Our fear of losing our temporal wealth drives these decisions about energy, despite the very real presence of cleaner, more sustainable alternatives in which other countries are investing.

More and more, our national politics is built on fear. Fear of the “other” underlies most of the hot-button stories in our national press. In pulpits and political daises around the country, homophobia is being promoted. We can’t let “those people” have the rights we have, is the cry, because somehow, mysteriously, it will take away from what we have. Xenophobia, the fear of foreigners is also popular. We can’t let “those people” across our borders, they’ll take our jobs – despite evidence that Latino and Latina immigrants mostly do the jobs that U.S. nationals refuse. Have we, as a nation which prides itself on its Christian heritage, forgotten the Biblical injunctions to treat immigrants well or Jesus’ teachings that even those who are most different from us are our neighbors, even our brothers and sisters? How have we become a people so encompassed by fear?

The Apostle Paul, in what is likely the last letter he wrote, gave his young colleague Timothy a very clear teaching on this subject. “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,” or of fear, he wrote, “but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” If anyone had a reason to fear, it was Paul. He was back in Rome, back in prison, and this time he knew he would not be released. He may have already been given his formal sentence of death, which as a Roman citizen meant beheading by a sword outside the city walls. But Paul would have undoubtedly known that other Christians were subject to much worse. Well-established Church tradition tells us that this was the time of Nero, the mad Caesar. The Methodist scholar Safiyah Fosua reminds us, “Nero was persecuting the Christians with cruelty and atrocity previously unknown. Christians were being dipped in wax and lit as “Roman” candles. They were thrown to the lions; they were crucified by the thousands.” Yet still, Paul reminds Timothy not to be afraid. Indeed, Paul was so unafraid of his captors, the most powerful Empire ever known at the time, that he did not even consider himself Rome’s prisoner. “Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner,” he writes. As William Mounce puts it in his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, “Paul was not suffering as a criminal but was a messenger of the gospel, and Christ’s purposes were not controlled by Rome but in fact superintended the emperor.”

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Paul's teaching to Timothy, and to us, is that we have no need to be afraid because God is in control. We can rely "on the power of God," according to Paul, the God whom Paul worshipped with a clear conscience as his ancestors did. We can rely on the power of God who created the heavens and the earth, the power of God who blessed Abraham for his faith and fulfilled Sarah's dream of a son, even in her old age. We can rely on the power of God who turned the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers into an act which save the whole family of Jacob from famine. We can rely on the power of God who guided a mother to put her baby in a basket in the river, who guided an Egyptian princess to rescue and raise that child, and who made of that Egyptian princeling the man who guided the Children of Israel out of slavery and to the border of the Promised Land. We can rely on the power of God who taught Gideon to drive the Philistines from the land of Israel with 300 men, some loud horns and some firepots, the power of God who emboldened the boy David to stand against the giant, the power of God who inspired Cyrus to let the people return from Babylon to Eretz Y'israel. We can rely on the power of God who raised up Jesus on the third day, although he had been scourged and crucified and pierced with a spear and buried in the tomb. Why should we fear? Why should we fear? If God is for us, who can be against us?

But the power of God, my brothers and my sisters, is not only in the great miraculous acts of salvation. It is also, as Paul reminded Timothy, found in the spirit of love. Instead of fear, we are called to love. If we see our Latino brothers, our Latina sisters with the eyes of love, will we not welcome them and care for them rather than fearing their impact on our economy, our self-interests, or even, as some have suggested, our "purity" as Euro-Americans? If we see our Gay and Lesbian and Transgendered neighbors with the eyes of love, will we withhold from them the rights to enjoy the legal protections of property within a relationship, or the blessing of God's people upon their heart-felt and nurturing unions, or their ability to follow the calling of God upon their lives as they understand it? If we see our Afghani neighbors with the eyes of love, how can we allow the continuance of a war which strikes their women and children as well as the men who believe they are fighting for their own country's independence? If we see our brothers and sisters of the Gulf Coast with the eyes of love, how can we support the oil companies that despoil their bayous? If we see our brothers and sisters who live on coastal plains around the world with the eyes of love, how can we continue to use without thought the hydrocarbons that contribute to the global warming that threatens to drown their lands? Why do we fear when we are called to love?

Paul tells Timothy that he should not even fear the possibility of suffering. "Join with me," says Paul, "in suffering for the gospel..." Now, suffering is not high on my list but if I take the promises of God seriously, then I cannot be afraid of adversity. Sometimes, though, I confess that I am afraid of standing up when I need to. Some of you have been kind enough to affirm my recent article in the Enterprise about an appropriate Christian stance toward Muslims in America but to be honest I had my heart a bit in my mouth when I submitted that article. I was concerned, well, actually, I was afraid of what kind of response it might get. Would I get hate mail? Nasty phone calls? Would our house get trashed again? I'm relieved to be able to tell you that I got exactly one politely worded e-mail explaining to me the error of my views and two very nice phone calls, one from a member of Good Shepherd and one from a total stranger, praising my meager efforts. Sometimes, we can be afraid of suffering that never comes.

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And should suffering come, should that dissuade us from doing what we know is right in the eyes of God? A Baptist colleague, Stan Wilson, pastor of Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi, retold a story of the Civil Rights movement in his online commentary of this passage. "Clarence Jordan founded the Koinonia Community in South Georgia, an interracial farming cooperative. One day a truck driver who had been delivering butane to the community told Jordan he was quitting: he'd been receiving racist threats from some outside of the cooperative. The man knew that if he delivered to Koinonia, he would lose other customers. Jordan did not waver. He confronted the man, and was not ashamed to ask him to suffer for the gospel. "It looks to me like you're in a spot. You're either going to lose some money or lose your soul," Jordan answered. After a further exchange concerning the physical danger of anyone caught cooperating with Jordan, the man promised to find someone else who would deliver the butane. Jordan did not move. "You mean you'd ask a friend to take a chance you're not willing to take yourself." Wilson concludes, "We all believe that Jesus came to save us from sin, but where did we get the idea that he came to save us from suffering?"

Paul also reminds us that even if suffering comes, it is not the end. In writing of God's purpose and grace, he says, "This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Not even death is the end, for we have been promised life everlasting, a spot at the heavenly banquet, and a mansion in the house of the Father. Once again, I ask with Paul, why should we be afraid?

Earlier, we sang a wonderful old hymn that has been a favorite of mine since childhood, the chorus of which comes from the King James Version of this passage: "for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." There is a wonderful turn of phrase hidden by both the old translation and by the NRSV, which we use. The phrase, "that which I have committed" or "what I have entrusted" is in Greek the word *παρραθηκη*, which means a deposit, or property trusted to another. In a day when bank failures and FDIC or FSLIC insurance are a common topic, isn't it nice to know that our most personal treasure, our lives and the promise of eternal life, is held not by a bank which is subject to fail, or by a government which may fall, or by any other human agency but by the most faithful One of all, our Loving Creator? Why indeed should we fear?

To close, I want to return to the beginning of Paul's final message to Timothy. Paul opens by letting Timothy know how grateful he is for him and reminds him that he knows all about Timothy's journey to faith and his solid grounding in the faith by his mother and his grandmother. "For this reason," says Paul, "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you..." William Mounce writes, "Because he knows Timothy's faith is sincere, he can remind Timothy to fan his spiritual gift... into full flame..." Just as Paul felt grateful to God for his association with Timothy, whom he had come to love as a son, so I feel grateful to God for you, the people called Good Shepherd Baptist Church, who have become my family. And just as Paul knew that Timothy's faith was sound, that he was a true follower of the True God and that he had been equipped by God for the tasks ahead of him, so I also know this to be true of you. As a group, your faith was established in many places by many teachers. For some of you it was your parents, for some a friend. Some of you came to faith under the leadership of Bernie Turner or Chuck Elven or Lee Campbell or Jerry Sutton or Joyce Lawlor or one of the interim pastors

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that have served this church so well over the years. But whatever the beginnings, I know this congregation to be composed of faithful people, equipped by God for the tasks at hand. My sisters and my brothers, your faith is real and it is in God through Christ Jesus, sustained by the Holy Spirit who lives in each one of us. So again, and finally, I remind you, God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Let no one make you afraid but stand together for the facing of this hour with the wisdom and courage that God will surely grant as we ask. For our shared faith, which is a gift of God, and for God's grace to us every day, thanks be to God.