

Overcoming the Fear Factor! Readings: Mark 4:35-41; 1Samuel 17:32-49 Proper 7B 6/20/21
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Jesus said to his disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:40) Fear is the common thread that runs through this Sunday’s biblical readings. The Israelites are afraid of Goliath and the disciples are afraid of the storm. How do we overcome our fears and how does faith play an integral part in the process? This is the subject of today’s sermon and I will use the gospel story as my text.

Biologically, fear is a warning sign that death, injury, or destruction is imminent. It is designed to warn us to avoid a dangerous situation either by fighting or fleeing. Fear activates a physiological response in the body. There is an increase in heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and glucose release. Blood flows into your limbs making it easier to throw a punch or run for your life. Stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline are released to give you aid in the fight or flight response. These physiological responses prepare us to face life and death situations, such as being chased by a gunman, avoiding a car crash, preventing a boat from capsizing, or rescuing a child from drowning.

The problem is that our fear response is not limited to life and death situations. We are afraid of many things. We are afraid that we will not have enough and so we hoard. We are afraid that we might fail and so we over function. We are afraid of being rejected and so we build up walls around our heart. We are afraid of taking risks and so we diminish our lives. We are afraid that our children won’t be successful and so we push and nag them throughout their childhood. We are afraid of heights and so we refuse to travel. But the greatest fear of all is death, even for those who have been blessed with a long life. It is this kind of fear that can deplete our joy, limited our choices, and rob us of inner peace. Let’s take a closer look at today’s gospel reading to gain some insight on how to overcome the fear factor.

Jesus was teaching the crowds by the Sea of Galilee. Late that day, he said to disciples: “Let us go across to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, he got into the boat and then fell asleep on the stern. A great windstorm arose which frightened the disciples so much that they panicked and woke Jesus up. Jesus calmed the storm and then asked his disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Notice that Jesus didn’t say that there is nothing to fear. Instead he asks: “Why are you afraid? What stands out for me in this story is that Jesus remains asleep during the storm. How can that be? My hunch is that he had trust in his disciples’ nautical skills. He was in the boat with at least four seasoned fisherman who had weathered many a storm on the Sea of Galilee. There were other boats nearby who could help out in a pinch. Jesus knew that his death was inevitable but he was not going to worry about it on a day to day basis. Finally, he had a deep and abiding faith in God’s providence, trusting that the Source of Life would win out in the end. There was no need to be consumed by fear!

The disciples on the other hand allowed fear to get the better part of them. Why didn’t they use their bailing buckets to remove the water that was swamping the boat? Why didn’t they use their nautical skills to chart a different course? Did they call out to the other boats to assist? Did they remain in the present moment and focus their energy on preventing the boat from being capsized? I don’t know for sure what went on, but what I do know is this. After Jesus calmed the storm, we are told that they were filled with great awe. However, the literal translation is: “*And they were frightened with great fear.*”

Fear is the root cause of all misery in the world. It devours our strength, keeps us in a constant state of agitation and turmoil, and plays havoc on our physical and mental health. Fear hampers initiative, suppresses skill, strangles ingenuity, and curbs our natural instinct of striving towards a higher level of consciousness. When we are fearful, we are not in a position to think soundly, to react lovingly, or to experience a life of joy. Fear can become a dark, giant cloud that robs us of an abundant life.

I remember an incident in my 20’s when fear caused great havoc with my equilibrium. It might seem trivial to you, but like the disciples, I was ‘frightened with fear.’ I had recently moved to California, starting at the bottom of the pay scale. So I rented an apartment with two roommates to help pay the rent. We were excellent tenants, paying our rent on time, keeping the place clean, and never bothering the landlord with minor complaints. The apartment was a bit worn from use and so we decided to paint the bedrooms. After about 10 months in this place, my roommates decided to move back to Nashville.

Soon after, the landlord called to announce that she would raise my rent the following year. I then decided to end the lease and find a cheaper apartment on my own. When she came to do an inspection of the apartment, she noticed that the bedrooms had been painted. Instead of saying “thank you”, she said: “Oh, I didn’t give you permission to paint those rooms. I am not going to return your security deposit.” Huh??? I tried to reason with her, even to the point of having the rooms repainted white. But she refused my offer and left in a huff. No way was she going to return my security deposit!

Internally, I went ballistic. I couldn’t believe her greedy and selfish response. This was an issue of justice! How could a landlord treat a responsible tenant this way? What justification could she have for withholding an entire month’s rent because we had painted her shabby bedrooms? Why wouldn’t she take up my offer to have the bedrooms repainted white? These are the questions that ran through my mind over and over again, until I was consumed with rage. When I came into my own, I went to Small Claims’ Court and won the case. But the damage that was done to my body, mind, and soul in the interim felt like I was still ‘frightened with fear.’ I needed to hear Jesus’ voice ask me: “Why are you afraid?”

Fear is a primary emotion. And from this fearful posture, secondary emotions like anger, rage, dejection, disappointment, hurt, sadness, and depression evolve. One of the ways to get a handle on fear is to analyze these secondary emotions in order to get back to the primary emotion of fear by asking: “Why are you afraid?” To be honest, I think I was reliving some of my early childhood experiences of the inner city where the more powerful people dominated and oppressed the less powerful people; a kind of David and Goliath scenario where the landlord treats the tenant like scum.

I was also afraid that I wouldn’t have the funds to pay the security deposit on a new apartment. I was afraid that injustice would win out in the end. I was angry that this supposedly “Christian woman” (who bragged about her faith when we first rented the place), displayed her true nature of greed and selfishness. I was disappointed that I was struggling to make ends meet even though I had 7 years of college behind me. I think I was also hurt that my roommates had abandoned me. I felt all alone, not having anyone to depend on except for myself. Had I been more adept at answering the question, *Why are you afraid*, I think I could have gotten a better handle on my fear factor. While faith could have restored my sanity and sense of well-being, I allowed the big, black cloud of FEAR to overshadow me.

While we don’t have the power to avoid fearful events from impinging upon our lives, we do have the choice on how we respond to them. This is where a life of faith comes into the equation. Faith does not prevent bad things from happening to us, but it does prevent fear from hijacking our inner peace.

Faith is a radical trust in life and by implication, trust in the Source of life. Faith comes from the Greek word, *pistis*, meaning trust. Faith is not an intellectual belief in a list of doctrines but rather a posture of trust in something that will ultimately lead us forward. Some people put their faith in God. Some people put their faith in weapons. Some people put their faith in money. Some people put their faith in human intelligence. Some people put their faith in their own ego strength. I think the reason why both David and Jesus in today’s biblical readings did not react with fear was because they were solidly grounded in God and trusted in this Source of life. They knew that there were other resources beyond the sword, the spear, and their own ego strength. They had the kind of faith that nurtures hope for a way into the future even when there is little surrounding evidence.

Jesus asks: “Have you still no faith?” I wish I had had more faith in my 20’s, but I didn’t. I was filled with cynicism and mistrust. Fortunately, I have matured on my faith journey over the years and for this I give thanks. Here are a few things I do today to increase my faith in God’s grace and providence.

1. Prayer: In fearful times and in quiet times, I often pray the psalms: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” “I lift my eyes to the hills, from where is my help to come. My help comes from the Lord.”
2. I try to hang out with faithful people, some of whom naturally have the gift of faith. These are the ones who no matter how difficult life is, trust that all will be well in the long run. Maybe you are one of those people who share your gift of faith. If so, I would love to meet you and thank you for your witness.
3. I am a practitioner of giving thanks. I rehearse the many blessings I have received both in the past and in the present. Gratitude reminds me that my blessings far outweigh the difficult events that once led me into fear. And here I am, alive and well and happy after being tossed around by the many storms in life.

4. And finally, when I do become afraid in the midst of stormy seas, I try to get to the root of my fears by asking: “Why are you afraid?” Then I slowly break down the giant cloud of fear into manageable pieces.

“Faith is the bird that sings when the dawn is still dark.” “Faith makes things possible, not easy.”

“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” (MLK Jr.)

“Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered and lo, no one was there.” Lord, increase our faith!