

Title: What are you afraid of?

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

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We are in the season of fear. We are only two days from Halloween: haunted houses are everywhere, the latest gory thriller, *Saw III*, debuted this weekend, and my dog Pete is has spent the last two weeks terrified by our neighbors' Halloween decorations. Other than Pete, most folks seem to enjoy this kind of fear – in fact, they pay money for it. It is fun to get the rush of adrenaline, and to relive it later with friends, laughing.

But not all fear is fun, and another type of fear inundates many of us now. We are in election season – 9 days from the big day. Election Day always means some level of fear for people in Washington, and this election, more than most in recent memory, has a lot of people scared about their jobs. Not just the elected politicians. Not even primarily the politicians. I'm thinking of primarily the thousands of people who support those politicians and who are at risk of losing their jobs. With one swing of the balance of power, fresh new faces will be in, and many others will be out. Washington real estate agents love election season. But for everyone else, these are scary times indeed.

While fear is felt acutely by those on Capitol Hill right now, most of us feel pangs of fear quite often in our lives. It starts at a young age. What if I don't get this school project done? What if that thing leaning up against my closet is not a pile of shirts but a monster? What if mom and dad divorce? As we get older, the object of our fears change, but our fear remains as potent. What if I never marry? What if I lose this job and can't afford to keep my house or put my kids through college? What if I keep this job for 40 years and when I retire, I realize that I have never done anything meaningful in my whole career? As our children and our parents age, we begin to fear for them, as well as for ourselves. What if my kids get picked on in school? What if Dad gets Alzheimer's? We all have fear of something.

And so, it is good for us to talk about fear. Let's start with what Jesus said about fear. You might be surprised, but Jesus talked a lot about fear. I have put together most of the times when he uses the word fear or afraid in the gospels. See if you can detect a pattern.

- “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”¹
- “Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but not the soul.”²
- “Don't be afraid – you are worth more than many sparrows.”³
- On the mountain after Elijah and Moses had appeared, he tells his disciples, “Get up. Do not be afraid.”⁴
- After the resurrection, Jesus tells various people, “Don't be afraid. Go and tell the others.”⁵

¹ Luke 5:10

² Matthew 10:28

³ Matthew 10:31, Luke 12:7

⁴ Matthew 17:7

⁵ Matthew 28:5-7, Mark 16:6-7,

- Talking to the synagogue ruler, whose daughter had just died, “Don’t be afraid. Just believe.”⁶
- “Don’t be afraid, little flock; the Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”⁷
- And perhaps most surprising and telling of all, at the last supper he would eat with them before his crucifixion, after he had again told them he had to leave them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.”⁸

Jesus is almost always telling his people to not fear. Which is sort of surprising, given the world that they lived in. Judea at the turn of the era was not always safe and pleasant – in fact, it was often dangerous and unpleasant. When Jesus told people to not fear, he knew full well what awaited him in Jerusalem. So, clearly he didn’t mean, ‘don’t fear for you will never be hurt.’ He didn’t even mean, ‘it will all work out in this life.’ Which is what people often interpret his ‘do not fear’ statements to mean – we don’t have to fear, because if we do what God wants, then we will stay healthy, and our portfolios will do well, and our children will succeed. But I have seen too many God-fearing Christians, who are better Christians than I am, suffer much more than I do, to believe that any longer. And I bet many of you could say the same thing.

No, I don’t think that he was telling people that their lives would be easy. ‘So, what was he trying to do,’ you ask. Here’s my thought. What if he was trying to do was to help people put the events of their lives in a larger context. Not trying to downplay the importance of events in their lives, but trying to help people remember why they don’t need to worry so much. The big things, the things worth worrying about, the things worth fearing, those are taken care of. So you can pour yourself into the other things, but always remember that they are not where your true being lies.

Look, here’s what I am saying. I think a lot about my fears. And when I try to simplify all my biggest fears down, they all boil down to the fear that things might ultimately not be okay. Whatever the fear – especially if it is something that I really think matters, my fundamental fear about the thing happening is that it will hurt me or someone I love in the long run, and by long run, I mean really long run – I mean the eternal run. And I think it possible that the same process is going on for you. If you don’t believe me, think of this. If your child or parent or friend was crying because they had to get an injection, and you knew, you absolutely knew that it would stop hurting in 10 minutes and they will have forgotten about it by tomorrow, and it would never affect them again, would you be distressed? Sure, you would be sad that they had to go through pain, but you would not be distraught the way people are when others have life changing events happen to them. The fear is that this life-changing event will literally change someone’s life – will set that person on a trajectory from which he or she cannot recover or be recovered.

Now when I scan the Christian theological dictionary for a term that means ‘being set on a trajectory from which one cannot recover or be recovered’ the closest term I can find is damnation. Thus, my greatest fear, when it is made plain, is metaphorical damnation – being outside the redeeming, healing, saving power of God. I fear that I will do something which will

⁶ Mark 5:36, Luke 8:50

⁷ Luke 12:32

⁸ John 14:27

cause me not to be alright in the end, or will cause someone I care about to not be alright in the end.

You see, we think we have come a long way in the last several hundred years. We think that we have gotten beyond that whole stuff about purgatory and indulgences and fear of hell fire and desire for peace with Jesus, but the truth is, we have just made those things more material. We have transformed the objects of our fear while thinking we had vanquished them. We have made damnation and salvation something that can happen in this world, if our children do not get into the right school, or our parents can't afford their health coverage, or we get a divorce. We have unconsciously equated success in this life with salvation and failure in this life with damnation. And, it is that equation, that confusion of earthly things with worldly things, with the resulting pressure that we must save ourselves that I think Jesus speaks to when he says 'be not afraid.'

Seen this way, our deepest fears are a sign of how we have conflated this world and the next and have forgotten who is truly the author of our salvation. This lack of faith flies in the face of the God of Jesus. My belief that I am responsible for my own salvation and for others' salvation is a confusion of my role with God's role. My fear is rooted in the belief that ultimately, God cannot make it okay, and therefore I must.

Henri Nouwen, a preacher and priest who wrote about 20 years ago in America told a story about his time with trapeze artists. Nouwen loved the circus and was friends with a group of trapeze artists called The Flying Rodleighs. There are two jobs in a trapeze group – you can be a flyer or a catcher. One day one of the flyers in the company was talking with Nouwen. "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump. . . The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. . . The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. . . A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him."⁹

I think that this is what salvation is like, and our job is to be caught, by a person who is more skilled than we are, and has arms that are stronger than ours are. When I fear that I am not going to be alright or that someone I love is not going to be alright – it is because I lose faith in the catcher and so I try to be the catcher, and catch myself or someone else. But, what I think Jesus was trying to say to a scared people was that ultimately, we are all flyers. A catcher's job is to catch, and a flyer's job is to fly. And as a flyer, your job is just that: to fly, and reach your arms out, sailing through the abyss, and let the catcher catch you.

Now, it is Reformation Sunday, the one Sunday a year when we focus on our Reformed heritage, as all of you realized the moment you heard the bagpiper in the parking lot. The amazing thing, and I promise I did not plan this, is that the question raised by our season of fear is answered by one of the central tenants of the Reformation. In fact, it is answered by what is perhaps the single biggest theological rallying cry from the reformation – salvation by grace through faith. For Presbyterians even more than Lutherans, who is the author of our salvation? God. God is

⁹ Nouwen, Henri. *Turn My Mourning Into Dancing*.

the author of our salvation. God is the ultimate catcher. We are ultimately saved by grace. Thus, I cannot save my family, any more than I can save myself. God is the savior.

Now many have rightly pointed out that this sort of faith – that God is ultimately in charge and all will ultimately work out – could lead to passivity. Karl Marx, and many less famous people, have worried that this type of future-based faith acts as a narcotic – dulling the pain of social injustice in this world, with the promise of rewards in the next. It has rightly been observed that those in power have temporarily benefited when this faith is applied in a certain way, as people do not rise up to change this world because it is so fleeting.

The idea that ‘everything will be okay in the end,’ can be an opiate, but it doesn’t have to be. In fact, Martin Luther King, Jr. that great reformer of the 20th century, prophetically named for that other great reformer of the 17th century, is a powerful demonstration that it does not have to be. He put his life in this world at risk as much as anyone, and yet he found his strength in the coming kingdom. In his final speech before he was killed, he spoke these words: “I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”¹⁰

Because King believed that we will all reach the Promised Land, he was freed the chains of worry and fear. He was freed to love others in a radical and dangerous way. Far from ignoring social injustice because all would be well some day, the fact that all would be well in the future allowed him to give of himself completely in the present. This is what Jesus was talking about. It is not a coincidence that the greatest teacher of love of neighbor spent so much time talking about fear. Why did he say don’t be afraid so much? Scared people are selfish people. Scared people cannot love others. They cannot stand up and risk their lives for those in need. Fear tells us to protect what we have, even if it means sacrificing others. Fear is a tool of the enemy. And that is why Jesus spoke the way he did. Be not afraid. Love your neighbors.¹¹ Be not afraid. I came to preach release to the captives¹²– To those held captive by their fear. Be not afraid. Have faith in God – God will ultimately catch us all. Be not afraid. Perfect love drives out fear.¹³ And love is the goal. Be not afraid! Be not afraid!

¹⁰ The speech, “I See the Promised Land” can be found in the book *A Testament of Hope*. This was King’s final sermon, given the night before he was killed. Washington, James M. *A Testament of Hope: The essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1986). P 286.

¹¹ Matthew 22:39, Mark 12: 31-33, Luke 10:27

¹² Luke 4:18

¹³ 1 John 4:18