

Facing Fear

By
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What are you afraid of? What is it that makes your heart beat faster and causes you to get anxious and break out in a cold sweat? I don't think there's a person alive that isn't afraid of something. For some, it can be a very specific phobia.



I personally am not a big fan of spiders. You'll never see me move any quicker than if a spider drops in front of me, or I walk into a big web. While I strongly embrace the Brethren life of peace and non-violence, that doesn't apply to arachnids. They are trespassers who are shot on sight.

In an article in Psychology Today, Karl Albrecht remarks that fear is "an anxious feeling, caused by our anticipation of some imagined event or experience." In the case of my fear of spiders, I'm anxious because I anticipate I could be harmed by a bite from said spider. Likewise, if you are afraid of heights, you are anxious because of the possibility you could fall, and be killed or seriously

injured. But all fear is not necessarily based on physical harm. We are also afraid of how some potential situations may affect us emotionally and physically: a fear of public speaking stems from the potential of poor performance and the embarrassment and humiliation that may result; a fear of intimacy or commitment stems from the potential of losing one's autonomy or control over their own lives; a fear of strangers can be the potential threat to one's physical well-being as well as a threat to one's autonomy.

These fear responses certainly have a biological basis. It's a primitive way of ensuring our potential independent survival and success. But that's one of the key factors in experiencing fear. It's always the "potential" of a situation, a "what if" scenario that is a possibility, but never a certainty. Often it's based on a previous experience or encounter, which our primitive brain then categorizes as a continuous threat to be avoided. The disciples in our Gospel story today are living out one such scenario.



They have found themselves on a boat in very stormy seas. The boat is starting to swamp, and they are facing the potential scenario of the boat sinking, and the future possibility of drowning. So they are becoming very anxious and desperate, and irritated. They wake Jesus up, angry that he does not appear to feel threatened as they do, that he doesn't share in their fear. Their irritation and anger illustrates another important point. Fear rarely acts alone, it often

generates other secondary emotions that then become problematic.



One of my favorite quotes from the Star Wars films is one by Yoda while talking with young Anakin Skywalker about the fears he struggles with. He tells him that “fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.” However, fear leads to many other emotions as well.

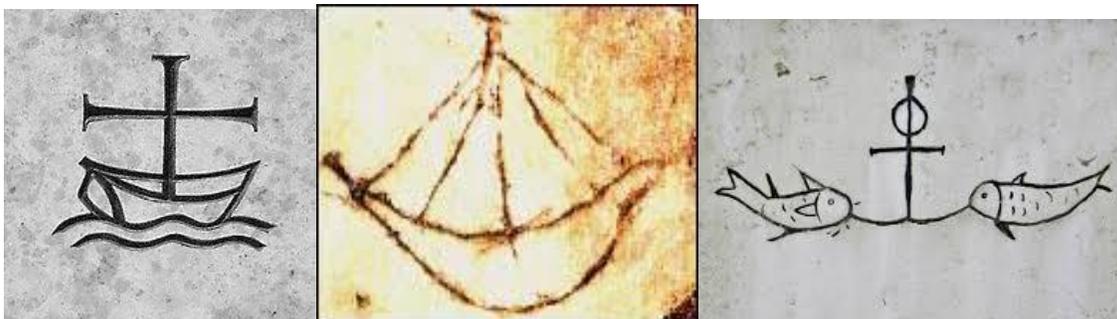
Jealousy and envy are reactions to the fear of losing status to another, to losing self-worth because of perceived shortcomings in ourselves.

So how do we come to terms with our fears, with our anxiety in events or interactions that we perceive may possibly have a negative impact on us in the future? Well, our primitive brains that drive our fear also seek simple solutions to minimize or eliminate these potential threats. I kill any spider I come across, without regard for whether it is likely to bite or poison me. If you have a fear of

heights, you generally avoid going to high places if you can avoid it, and if not, minimizing your exposure to such sights. If a person is perceived as a threat to your ego in the case of envy or jealousy, you'll either try to avoid any interaction, or try to discredit their worth so they are no longer a threat.

It's all about establishing security so we don't feel threatened. But do these actions really give us security? If I kill the spider, is it really the only one in my house? If I choose to avoid high places, does that mean I no longer have a risk of falling and suffering injury? If I avoid or slander someone I'm jealous or envious of, will that keep me from feeling insecure?

In our reading today, the disciples have ventured forth in boats that they feel secure in, that they are anticipating will provide them protection from the potential threat of physical harm and drowning. And while we may read this story and see the boats as just a minor detail, for Mark's audience, the image of a boat had much greater significance.



For the early Christians, the boat was symbolic of the church. The boat image, along with images of fishes and loaves, are prominent on the graves of early Christians in the Roman catacombs. For the followers of Mark who would be the early readers of this gospel, that imagery would have a deeper meaning. For them, the boat represented the safety of the church in times of persecution and

tribulation, a safe haven from the storm. They could really identify with the fears and concern of the disciples fighting the waves, working together to keep the ship afloat.

I think that's something we can identify with too.

Like the early Christians, aren't we struggling to keep our ship afloat in our own time? Unlike our predecessors though, our dilemma isn't so much persecution as a smaller crew, and issues with recruiting new sailors. But we're still fighting to keep our ship afloat as well.

But therein lies the dilemma.

Unlike our early Christian predecessors, we've been able to keep to the safety and security of the church ship for quite some time now. But from inside the boat, what can we really accomplish? The early Christians often earned their persecution because of their activities in their communities, the different way of living they modeled. Which also begs another question, do these boats we build to keep ourselves safe from fear and anxiety really solve that problem? No matter how much we try to protect ourselves from any potential threat, are we ever free from fear? That's what Jesus is getting at as he rebukes his disciples for their fear. Fear is based on potential events, events that may never transpire. We let our primal emotions cloud our judgment, and our faith in God's

providence.



There's a story of a young hiker who slipped and fell off a cliff while hiking on a mountaintop. Luckily, he was able to grab a branch on his way down. Holding on for dear life, he looked down only to see a rocky valley some fifteen hundred feet below. When he looked up, it was twenty feet to the cliff where he had fallen. Panicked he yelled, "Help! Help! Is anybody there? Help!"

A booming voice spoke up, "I am here, and I will save you if you believe in me."
"I believe! I believe!" yelled back the man.

"If you believe in me, let go of the branch and then I will save you."

The young man, hearing what the voice said, looked down again. Seeing the rocky valley below, he quickly looked back up and shouted, "Is there anybody else up there?!"

Like that young man, we like to have solutions that make us feel secure, not ones that require us to let go of our control, or the illusion of control that we have.

Instead, we too often let our focus shift from the needs and reality of the here and now to a future that may not ever come to pass. Instead of trusting in God for the end result, we try to control the future ourselves, letting fear and all the emotions that come with it rob us of the present, and our responsibilities to it. When we let our fear lead to anger, mistrust, and even hatred, suffering is the result.



Last week I brought up the ongoing and continuing crisis of migrant families being separated and in detention, and the suffering that has resulted in that, as well as the bible being quoted in support of such misery.

Yet what is at the root of all of this?

Fear, plain and simple.

Fear of losing our status and security, fear of the stranger and the unknown.

So we let this fear become anger and hatred, until eventually the stranger becomes the personification of those unrealized or unfounded fears, and bigotry and discrimination take over. Sound familiar at all? Maybe we should give a little thought to who is teaching us this lesson from Mark this morning.



Someone who was ostracized as a potential threat by his community, his faith, his government. Someone who was made a scapegoat as the personification of

the dangerous stranger, the one who is not like us, who is different and a threat to our way of life. Perhaps Jesus is making the point that he knows where fear can lead, knows all too well how badly it can turn out.

The question is, are we, like the disciples, listening? Are we willing to put our faith in God, or continue to give all our attention to the false sense of security that the boats we build for ourselves provide. And if we focus only on maintaining this church ship and keeping it afloat to allay our fears of the unknown future, will we ever reach our destination and accomplish our mission in this world?



Christian author Philip Yancey describes an encounter he had when promoting his book, *Where is God When It Hurts*:

“A man came up to me and said, 'Sorry, I don't have time to read your book. Can you just answer that question for me in a sentence or two?' I

thought for a moment and said, 'I guess the answer to that question is another question. Where is the church when it hurts? If the church is doing its job—binding wounds, comforting the grieving, offering food to the hungry—I don't think people will wonder so much where God is when it hurts. They'll know where God is: in the presence of his people on earth.'"

That sense of security the boat provides isn't just a group dynamic, it applies to us personally as well. What in our own lives do we cling to for the supposed security those things provide, even though they may be keeping us from truly trusting in our faith in God? What are the faces of our own fear that keep us anxious of the future at the expense of our duties as the body of Christ in the here and now? Is it really the faces of strangers and those who are different from us that threaten our future, or our own lack of faith?

If you are sitting here today, that implies that you've successfully made it through all your yesterdays and the fears that accompanied them, to the future that became today. Yet how much more could you have accomplished in those yesterdays if you didn't have that fear holding you back, making you hesitate and doubt the actions you might have chosen? Will we be the church that is where people find God at work actively healing instead of hurting, giving comfort to those in fear themselves?

I hope and pray we will.

I hope we are willing to speak up or speak out when the occasion calls, without fear. I hope we are willing personally and collectively to help those in need: in need of comfort in whatever form that takes.

Will we trade our fear for faith and be the active face of God that people seek, or just another face fearful of an uncertain future? What choice will we make?

Amen.

Offertory Sentence [Invitation to Give]

God, you have offered unique gifts to each one of us.

Teach us to celebrate and share those gifts so that we may create communities of graciousness and love.

Through Jesus, we are reminded of the difference that an individual contribution can make

.Let us offer our gifts generously for the service of all.

Offertory Prayer [Prayer of Dedication]

Bighearted God,

we ask you to take these gifts,

bless them,

and use them

to calm storms

and create in our communities new, imaginative, and life-giving streams.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

We are the face of Christ in this world

Let us strive to be beacons of confident compassion and justice

And go forth to be the remedy to fearful faces, not the example.

Amen.