

Searched by the Psalms

Psalm 46 & Luke 21:5-19
(Hymns – 315, 30, 451, 765)
November 14, 2010

Fear & Faith

Thank you for helping me with this sermon.
Here's what you have written on the cards this morning.

[answers to the question, "What do you fear most?" are:

Loss of identity
Not achieving fulfillment
The deaths and violence in our community
The lies of the people
Dark without a light
Looking in the mirror in the morning
An angry wild animal
Illness for self and love ones – suffering
That I may not live up to the expectations of my family
Shortage of water
Earthquakes
Being falsely accused or having my motives/intentions being misunderstood
The unknown
Asteroids
Losing everything I have
Snakes, spiders, and sharks
Death and snakes]

This morning I want to reflect for a few moments
on the impact of fear and its antidote,
on what fear can do to us and what we can do about that.

I think I've used this quote before,
but it's still the best literary description of fear I've found.
It comes from Canadian author Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*.
It's the story of a young boy cast adrift in the Indian Ocean
with a large bengal tiger in a small lifeboat.
That is the setting for this description of fear and its impact.

I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease. It begins in your mind, always. One moment you are feeling calm, self-possessed, happy. Then fear, disguised in the garb of mild-mannered doubt, slips into your mind like a spy. Doubt meets disbelief and disbelief tries to push it out. But

disbelief is a poorly armed foot soldier. Doubt does away with it with little trouble. You become anxious. Reason comes to do battle for you. You are reassured. Reason is fully equipped with the latest weapons of technology. But, to your amazement, despite superior tactics and a number of undeniable victories, reason is laid low. You feel yourself weakening, wavering. Your anxiety becomes dread.

Fear next turns fully to your body, which is already aware that something terribly wrong is going on. Already your lungs have flown away like a bird and your guts have slithered away like a snake. Now your tongue drops dead like an opossum, while your jaw begins to gallop on the spot. Your ears go deaf. Your muscles begin to shiver as if they had malaria and your knees to shake as though they were dancing. Your heart strains too hard, while your sphincter relaxes too much. And so with the rest of your body. Every part of you, in the manner most suited to it, falls apart. Only your eyes work well. They always pay proper attention to fear.

Quickly you make rash decisions. You dismiss your last allies: hope and trust. There, you've defeated yourself. Fear, which is but an impression, has triumphed over you. The matter is difficult to put into words. For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation, such as you feel when you are brought face to face with your mortal end, nestles in your memory like a gangrene: it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you.

Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi* (178-179)

Martel pits life against fear.
Fear drains your life and leaves you falling apart,
fear after fear.

There are psychologists who claim that fear is the basic condition of human life.
We live in constant chronic fear.
At times, it becomes acute and visible.
But most of the time, it is a silent killer eating away at our vitality.

Not only does fear eat away at our vitality,
it also isolates us.
When we are afraid, we often feel very much alone.
We fear to even share our feelings of fear.

The more I reflect on this theme,
the more I wonder if much of our alienation from God
results from our fear of God –
or at least fear of our own images of God.

If we see God as a stern judge,
angered by our failure to live up to his demands,
then fear is an understandable result.

If we see God as a distant power,
ruling like a mighty king,
concerned with really important world matters and not with our little problems,
then fear of being ignored can easily arise.

If we see God as not really concerned at all,
just an impersonal power that fuels the operations of the universe,
then fear of those impersonal forces can overwhelm us.

Psalm 46 testifies to a different kind of God,
the One that Christians follow and worship.
For the Christian, life – flourishing life to use my favourite word yet again –
comes in its true fullness from the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit –
who is, and longs to be seen as, humanity’s refuge and strength.

This is the God who calls a people through Abraham
to be a blessing to all nations.

This is a God who says repeatedly to his people,
“Fear not, I am with you.”

This is a God who sends that people into the world to love in his name,
thus casting out fear.

The Psalm uses striking images to describe God’s power
to calm threats and eliminate fears.
The community is singing praise for the protective power of God
and the strength that it gives them
to overcome their fears and be a blessing.
The triumph over fear has a purpose – to free people through faith to bless.

The refrain captures the central message of the Psalm:

*The Lord Almighty is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge.*

God’s presence ultimately protects us from everything we fear.

Concern and caution may persist, and should persist,
but we do not let our fears define our lives.

Trust in God prevails,
trust that God will protect and strengthen us
to be the blessings we were created to be,
to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
in the most fearsome of circumstances.

So, all of those things you listed when I asked you what you feared most are real,

but they do not have the final word from the perspective of the Christian faith.

That final word belongs to God.

That Word is Jesus Christ who, in the power of the Holy Spirit,
nevers leaves us alone and isolated in our fears,
but speaks words of companionship, comfort, and strength
to empower us to flourish as blessings to this creation.

So, what we can do about fear is to accept the gift of faith offered in Jesus Christ.

We can acknowledge, appreciate, and appropriate
the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome everything that threatens us
and to keep our focus the love of God that nourishes strength and blessing.

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