

Philippians 3:17- 4.1; Luke 13:31-35; Psalm 27

When Facing Fear

When my son Eric¹ was a child, like many of us, he was afraid of the dark. It's a natural survival precaution because physical darkness means that we lose some of our ability to assess danger, we can't see what is around us, can't easily discern what certain sounds are, we know we are vulnerable because we'll likely be going to sleep and anything can happen. In order to survive our instincts tell us that we must be cautious when it is dark.

So anyway, Eric was sometimes afraid when going to bed at night. One morning he reported to me that the night before he had stayed awake long after being put to bed because he was afraid. But then he remembered that in Sunday School he had been taught that if you are afraid you can read the Bible and it will help you not to be afraid anymore. So he went and got his newly acquired Bible that TUMC gives to kids in grade 3, he read it, and it helped!

Now you who are parents, or are connected with raising kids, know that the spiritual formation of our children can be tricky. One never knows for sure what messages are being received and how they are being processed. So I was thrilled that he had turned to scripture and I asked him what he had read in the Bible. "The table of contents! he told me – and then I knew that we had more learning to do. I love that story because we turn to God and God comforts us.

Today I invite us to reflect on the theme of fear of darkness. Fear of things unknown, of loss of control, of limited vision, of bumps in the night – real or metaphorical. This topic was percolating well before the hate-fueled events against Muslim's in New Zealand a few days ago, so it has become particularly pertinent.

But first I need to make a caveat²: We will be using the images of darkness and light – images we get from our scripture readings today, and from our day to night to day to night cycles of existence on this planet. Some of us have begun to use these images with more caution. And some of us avoid them all together. Why? Because we've realized that lightness and darkness language and imagery has been co-opted (stolen, misused) by people who speak of race and skin colour and of certain geographical locations using those terms. These ways of thinking attribute more value to lightness than to darkness. More value to white than black. It is called white supremacy, or superiority, and it lives within the systems that we navigate. In this version of things, darkness is often only thought of as evil and lightness only as good. I reject any such value judgments and I

¹ Told with permission

² an explanation to prevent misinterpretation

reject the application of these images of light and dark, especially when it comes to people and their appearance or geographical origins. It is important to state these things.

And I appreciate the metaphorical value of these familiar scriptural images of light and dark. Especially when we consider that they are not value-laden in and of themselves, nor without nuance. Consider this: before electrical lighting, lightness and darkness always phased into one another. You couldn't just walk into a dark place and flip a switch on a floodlight like we can now. It is an image that isn't of stark contrast but of continuity. Consider also how unhealthy it can be to live in places where there is no darkness.

Anyway... back to fear.

What are *you* afraid of? Me? Tsunamis or any kind of deep water, toads, needles, harm to my loved ones, accidentally hurting other people, irrelevance, global warming, the principalities and powers of politics, terrorists, random violence, ignorance, prolonged suffering, and so on.

And I'm afraid of the news. Of facism, racism and other violent isms. This week we had reason to fear because people who were praying in a Mosque in New Zealand were killed – in a place called Christchurch. So add to all that, fear for the world. *Kyrie Eleison*. Lord have mercy!

Let me say at the start, that fear can be a healthy response to danger. We are living at a time in our world when fear seems to be a justified first response. Trusted systems are breaking down the future is uncertain at best, or it is certain in ways that are difficult to fathom. It is tempting to retreat into denial – head in the sand, one of my favourite coping strategies.

But fear can and *must* also move us into action rather than paralysis – that's the whole point of fear, we were given this instinct so that we can spring into action!

Here are a few questions to ponder:

- What do our fears tell us about ourselves?
- How *do* we live with fear?
- How can we keep from being overwhelmed?
- Can it ever be a positive thing to experience fear and loss of control?
- What exactly can we expect from God and from a life of discipleship in terms of mediating or taking away our fears?

I think our gospel text today may be helpful in trying to sort some of this out. Let's check out what's going on. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem, and this

passage is part of that journey. We're in Lent and the passage has an unmistakable tone of foreboding.

This episode starts with a warning of danger. The Pharisees come to Jesus and extend him the kindness of cautioning him that his life is at risk. Herod – the crazy emperor with too much power who (in other gospel accounts) had already beheaded the prophet John the Baptist on a whim at a party – was out to get Jesus too. As one commentator observed, “there’s always a Herod.”³ The Pharisees warned Jesus that he should flee or he’d be caught in a few days. Jesus’ reaction gives us some insights on what posture to take when threatened.

Take back the situation, stare fear in the face and speak the truth. Here’s my version of what Jesus said: “Well, you can tell that, that fox that I’m too busy doing God’s work, you know, healing, delivering, and saving people. I will be taking my own good time going to Jerusalem. And yes, I know that I will likely be killed, because that’s what it has come down to for prophets (P.R.O.P.H.E.T.S) in that city.”

So, facing the threat and the fear that comes with it, Jesus looks straight at it, defies it. It’s an important step in overcoming fear. Look at the danger head on.

In a slightly related illustration, I was talking to Carmen Wiebe (from our congregation) who is a psychiatrist working with people suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She mentioned that they are having great success with an old treatment called Prolonged Exposure therapy. Instead of avoiding the traumatic events, previously traumatized patients are guided to face them repeatedly until the memories of the traumatic event lose the power to disrupt their emotional state in the present (or to engender fear responses). Exposure is also a therapy approach that is used for any anxiety disorder - OCD, worrying, phobias and so on.

I think this idea of fear losing its power is one of the things that is going on in the passage. It isn’t clear whether Jesus was afraid, but those around him certainly were. Jesus is aware of the danger and walks straight into it, not foolishly but firm in the knowledge that he has a task to do that disrupts the imperial powers that are coming after him. He’s operating by the rules of another “kingdom” the realm of God, as he calls it. He is grounded in his vocation, his identity, and his values.

This is the also the posture of the good folks in the Philippians passage to **put things in perspective**. When facing threat they reminded themselves that they had a different citizenship, as it were, a different allegiance. (And that’s all the time we have for the Philippians this morning.)

³ Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel*

Another way to face threats and the fear that comes with them, is **reorienting priorities** towards a radical dependence on God.

When we prepare sermons or study a portion of scripture, one strategy we often use is to back up and see what else is going on around a particular passage. I wish I had time to just go back and read from Luke chapter 12 – please do this at home, it is scarily enlightening. In this exercise it becomes very clear that Jesus is teaching and speaking in the context of a lot of the same political and societal anxieties that we ourselves are facing in our time. We can see that Jesus is calling his followers to a different way of living, to a shift in priorities, one might even say to detachment or to radical dependence on God.

In Luke 12:4 he says “I tell you my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more.” He goes on to warn with teachings against greed, against people who are storing up “treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.” He tells them “life is more than food and the body more than clothing” (Luke 12:23). And in classic Jesus meme-style: “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” (Luke 12:25).

Now realistically, it’s not usually helpful to tell anxious or worried people to berate them saying: “Don’t worry.”

I don’t think this is what Jesus is doing here is that simple. He is offering consolation, presence, not rebuke. We’re so used to hearing “preachy Jesus” that we might overlook compassionate Jesus in these words. Throughout this part of Luke he is calling his followers to repent (reorient 180 degrees). It’s not about “woe what a sinner I am” it’s about “oops, I’m doing it wrong, let me do it a different way.” To shift their priorities away from the material concerns, and that’s a good thing.

Jesus is inviting them – us—to get some perspective, to look at things from a different angle, to remember God and God’s provision. In Luke 12:32,33 he says: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” It’s pretty clear that in the realm of God there is a different kind of economy—and getting away from fear is about economy for us as well.

Consider this, one of the main reasons people give to carry guns is to protect their property. I do not take this fear lightly, I have lived in circumstances where you could be killed because someone wanted to steal your sneakers or your car. We may not realize it, but we are under enormous pressure to conform to certain economic ways of measuring our worth outside of God’s Realm. This is important because our fears and

anxieties are tied to the things we value and the things we think are important, to where our heart is, as Jesus puts it.

Here is a small example of what I'm trying to say, that I came across this week from Twitter. It illustrates this reorienting of priorities:

“how to know you've internalized capitalism:

- you determine your worth based on your productivity
- you feel guilty for resting
- your primary concern is to make yourself profitable
- you neglect your health
- you think “hard work” is what brings happiness”⁴

The realm of God is guided by a different economy, where some types of fear and anxiety do not find a foothold. This is the work of becoming a follower of Jesus, this reorientation. As the familiar passages in Romans 12 says it, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

And so in our gospel passage for today, Jesus is inevitably on the way to Passion week – he *is* going to be killed – we see detachment and defiance in the face of fear and danger. Jesus stares down the death threats and claims his own agency and grounds himself in his own calling, and gives himself over rather than have his life be taken from him.

And then, in a shift in the text we see again the compassion in Jesus' poignant lament about Jerusalem. Jesus speaks in the protective voice of God “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.”

Later in Luke 19 we will have a scene just before the so-called triumphal entry and the cleansing of the Temple where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and says “If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”

This lament feels to me like a glimpse into Jesus' heart. I'm always deeply moved by it. Jesus by now in the story has been to Jerusalem at least once a year for his whole life, when his family would make pilgrimage to the Temple. Jerusalem stands in as the centre of the religious and political world of his people. And they don't get what it means to live in the realm of God and it breaks his heart.

One author suggested doing a thought experiment of replacing our own city for Jerusalem. Toronto, Toronto... if only you would recognize what makes for peace.

⁴ fatimal@rosemater

Oh broken racist world, Jesus saying, how I long to gather you like a hen gathers her chicks.

In the end when facing fear and the darkness of the world around us, our best option is indeed to take shelter under God's wings, under her compassionate love. Not in a sentimental way but in a way that faces the threats and moves forward with determination, in a way that is defined by sacrificial love rather than in defense of privilege and property.

Can we listen to Jesus' longing to restore wholeness?

Can we cry with him over a world that still does not recognize what makes for peace?

(A prayer by Wendy Janzen)

O God, Mother Hen,

We open our hands and hearts to you in prayer,
and slowly let go of all of our fears and anxieties.

Life gets heavy, sometimes, God.

We carry a lot on our shoulders.

We listen to news of violence and hatred,
climate disruption and extinctions.

We breathe polluted air and are drowning in garbage.

We worry for our children and future generations.

We struggle with busyness and lack of focus.

We look for leadership, and find political folly.

In the midst of our troubles,
help us to find refuge in your shelter.

May we seek your face, your light,
your beauty, your peace.

Lift us up from the mire, and set us secure on solid rock.

Be our mother hen, gathering us close,
protecting, nurturing, sheltering.

Amen.

- Wendy Janzen