

Fear and Faith
Proper 14C
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40
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When someone says to me, “Don’t be afraid,” my typical response is one of two things- “You’re joking right? I have every reason to be afraid,” OR “Well, I wasn’t, but I am now!” The phrase ‘don’t be afraid’ tends to ramp up fear, not settle it down. At least some of the time. Our response depends upon several factors, but ultimately it comes down to the amount of trust and faith you have in the one uttering those words.

Phrases such as “Don’t be afraid,” “Fear not,” and their variations appear frequently in the Bible, though not three hundred and sixty-five times as you may have read on the internet. Beginning with Abram, later called Abraham, and throughout our salvation history, we read stories of God and Jesus telling people to not be afraid. It is hard though to not be afraid. When your health or the health of someone you love is failing, it is hard not to be afraid. Fear is often a constant companion as prices rise, and you must decide between putting food on the table or paying your rent. If your skin is any color than white, it is hard not to be afraid that you will be snatched off the streets, shut away from anyone who can help you, or that you will end up dead merely for existing. When your world is falling apart, fear becomes a constant companion. There are many things that cause us to fear as fears come in all shapes and sizes.

Some fears cause us to see the world through lenses of scarcity rather than ones of abundance. I’m reminded of the toilet paper hysteria during the early months of the COVID-19 lockdown when people began hoarding toilet paper out of fear that they wouldn’t have rolls of velvety softness in their bathrooms. Black market transactions and even fights broke out over these small rolls of paper. People use our fears, particularly those in power, to manipulate us and to twist us into someone other than whom God created us to be.

To be fair, there are fears that keep us safe and from doing stupid things that might land us in jail or the hospital. But when God says to us, “Don’t be afraid,” they are addressing those fears that drive us into darkness causing us to lose hope. The fears on which evil uses to drive wedges between us, to keep us from loving our neighbors, from loving God, and even loving ourselves.

When I look back through the various times when God's people were told to not be afraid, I began to see a pattern developing where there was a choice between faith and fear. Abraham choosing between his fear of dying without an heir or having faith in God's promise that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky. Joshua, who took on the fearsome task of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land after Moses died. Mary, an unwed teenager, whose life was turned upside down when an angel told her she would give birth to God's son. A crowd of people fearful about what the future holds, trying to decide whether to trust what Jesus was telling them. None of God's people are without fear.

What allows us to push through our fears is our faith in the one who says to us, "Don't be afraid. I've got your back. I am with you every step of the way." Faith doesn't make our fears magically go away nor will it result in instant satisfaction. What faith does is to let us do the work we need to do. It gives us the courage to keep going when all seems lost. Faith allows us to trust in the promise during the gap between it and its fulfillment.

But pushing past our fears, trusting in faith, is easier said than done. Both faith and fear are like a war within us. A war between logic and emotion, mind and heart. Sometimes, mind and heart are in total sync. But other times they are in conflict. The story of Abraham and Sarah is a great example of this battle. They were seventy-five years old when they first pulled up stakes to travel to an unknown country, leaving behind safety and comfort. Logically, this was a bad move because the long journey ahead was difficult. They weren't jumping on a plane and letting a moving company do the rest. The journey they undertook was physically demanding, and their bodies were betraying their age. Sarah was eighty-nine years old when she overheard God tell Abraham that she would give birth to her first son. Her response- she burst out laughing. Logically, she knew that giving birth at her age was impossible. But once all the reasons 'not to' and the laughter had settled down, faith won the day. They chose heart over mind, faith over fear.

In our reading from Hebrews, we hear faith called "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) The book *The Little Prince* puts it another way, "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes." (Saint-Exupery, 2000; original publication 1943, p. 63). Faith is a matter of the heart. We see clearly only through the lens of faith. The 'leap of faith' you hear so much about is trusting what your heart tells you to do when your mind is screaming at you, "*Don't leave the safety your comfort zone!*"

But imagine where we would be if all those who have gone before us didn't step out of their comfort zone by faith trusting in the Holy Trinity when they said, "Don't be afraid." I'm not just talking about those people we read about in the Bible, but all those throughout human history- including our fathers, mothers, and neighbors - who chose faith over fear. Sometimes those faith steps were baby steps. Others were giant leaps. More commonly, faith is two steps forward and one step back. Or maybe even one step forward and three steps back. Faith is a process.

Fear though is a fundamental part of being human. But when we let our many fears overtake us, beating us into apathy or acquiescence, we can find ourselves stuck, wandering in a desert of our own making, unable to see the way forward or a way out. When the darkness of our fears closes in, Jesus' light shines through the cracks showing us the way out. His voice steals past our fears saying to us, "Don't be afraid. I am here."

Logic doesn't move us onward when fear is in our path. It is our heart that sees the way out, giving us the courage to believe in something more important than our fears. It is faith in the hope of things we can't see- the promise of unconditional love, mercy, and grace- that allows us to see the light of Christ that shines in our hearts, illuminating the Kingdom of God that surrounds us.

The kingdom is here and now, and God has made us its caretakers. God has faith in us to maintain it and to build onto it, expanding the kingdom wherever we go. And that my brothers and sisters is a scary thought in and of itself. But by faith, one step at a time, we can be whom God created us to be despite all our fears. Our faith in the crazy, incomprehensible, unconditional love of God which defies all logic, it is faith in this love that allows to go forth into the world, proclaiming the Good News of Christ by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen.

Works Cited

Saint-Exupery, A. d. (2000; original publication 1943). *The Little Prince*. (R. Howard, Trans.) Harcourt, Inc.