

## Fear Vs. Faith

Our lessons today invite us to ponder what it looks like to live a life of faith versus a life of fear. We live today in a society driven, in many ways, by fear. All of us, unfortunately, experience our fears being played upon just about every time we listen to or read the news. Of course, we do have many reasons to fear...we live in a time and place where violence, tragedy, and loss are commonplace. Things I used to take for granted in terms of safety, I no longer do. When touring a new elementary school for my son last spring, one of my primary thoughts was how difficult or easy it would be for a shooter to get into the school. That thought never crossed my mind a decade ago when my oldest started school. So while we can affirm there are plenty of reasons to fear, we are also faced with the fact that Scripture is consistently inviting us out of fear and into faith. One of the most common phrases throughout both the Old and New Testaments are two simple words, "Fear not."

And today we hear Jesus' tender statement to us in the Gospel of Luke, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." "Do not be afraid little flock."

A certain amount of fear, of course is healthy, the problem is when fear begins to rule us. For example, a fear of the dark is fairly understandable and certain precautions must be undertaken when walking in the dark -but if that fear prevents us from ever being in the dark – there's a problem. Being overly fearful prevents us from living out a life in its God-given fullest sense. Faith, on the other hand, reminds us that God is with us, whatever we may encounter, and so while we take precautions, faith don't allow fear to govern us.

I realize fear is a heavy topic – so allow me to share a light - hearted story with you on the subject before we get too far into it about a little boy who was afraid of the dark. "One evening his mother asked the boy to go out onto the back porch and bring her the broom. The little boy said, "Mama, please don't make me go out there. It's dark and

you know I'm scared of the dark." His mother smiled at him and said reassuringly, "There's no need to be afraid of the dark. Jesus is out there and he'll look after you and protect you." The little boy seemed unsure and said, "Are you sure? The mother said, "Yes, I'm sure. Jesus is everywhere and is always there and ready to help when you're in need." The boy thought for a moment, then went to the back door, opened it and called out, "Jesus - if you're out there, please pass me the broom."

A little bit of fear is okay -but too much fear is problematic. Think about some of the troublesome outcomes of having too much fear:

- It can lead us to try become overly controlling-controlling of others
- It can lead us to cling too tightly to our possessions and wealth -as if they will secure and save us
- It can lead us to vilify others- this is directly connected to the ways that fear leads us into black/white thinking in order to make things more comprehensible, contained and manageable for us. (Like: "These people are bad, these people are good.")
- It also inhibits our ability to come up with creative solutions to the problems before us. Too much fear shuts down creativity and looking for possibilities that will benefit everyone.
- Fear can cause us to create extensive safety precautions that go far beyond what is necessary and then insulates us from others and from new opportunities.
- And according to Scripture, fear can prevent us from living the kind of life God has called us to, thus preventing us from living a life of faith

There was a survey of elderly adults who were preparing to die and the question was asked, "What do you most regret about your life?" By far the most common answer was, "Not taking enough risks." What risks might God be calling you into at this time? Is fear holding you back? What kind of risks might God be calling us to take as a society? A church? A city? A nation? Where does fear need to be curtailed so that faith can step in?

As a parent, I'm well acquainted with fear for my children and I know most parents carry around a lot of fear for the safety of their children. Here in La Jolla, we live near the beach and the ocean is a big part of our lives, even though we know that the ocean is a rather dangerous place. Last weekend I brought my children to Coronado Island and we were playing in the water when suddenly my son Graysen, who is 6 years old, screamed and reeled backwards, falling to the ground in the sand, and holding his foot, crying hysterically. I could see blood and I removed a barb sticking out of the bottom of his big toe. I wasn't sure but others at the beach told me to get him medical attention because it seemed like the sting of a sting ray. It was a scary for all of us as I carried him to the car and drove quickly to our local urgent care where Graysen got treatment. It was such a dreadful and painful experience that my first thought was, "I'm never taking my kids to the ocean again!" Indeed, I know people so overtaken by fear of the ocean that they never go in it. I had to step back and even pray about it that night – because while its necessary to take important safety measures at the ocean, I didn't want this experience to drive me to a place of constant fear.

And I know the importance of not allowing experiences like that to take over because there was a moment in my life when fear lead me to a stop to doing something I loved. I was 17 years old and my family and I were vacationing in Rosarito Beach at my grandfather's beach house. I was surfing a lot at the time and I loved it. I was fairly fearless about the ocean, but one afternoon I had been out in the water for several hours and was getting tired, so I swam with my surf board well beyond the breakers and sat out in the calm water, meditatively enjoying the peace and beauty of the ocean...at least until I felt something roughly bump into my left leg under the water. I immediately froze – and then I felt it again -another bump, this time harder, right into my left calf. I knew this had to be a shark testing me out, thinking I was a seal, but instead of reacting the way I had been told, I became paralyzed. It's the only time in my life that I was so scared I literally couldn't move. And then

a gray fin came up out of the water- not 3 feet away from me – and it literally circled me. At that point every attack scene from the Jaws movies came flashing into my mind. It seemed like my breathing stopped and I was glued in place. A few seconds later I saw a second fin pop up out of the water near me. And I started to pray – pray for a miracle, because I was now envisioning a very painful death. And then, (right here) on my right, maybe a foot from me, the face of a dolphin emerged and he made his loud dolphin barking sound at me – which sounded a lot like a laugh-saying – "Did I scare you? We're just having some fun!" And while of course there was relief inside me, I was also still too frightened to move and I whispered to him, "Please go away." And they did. It's a story I have told on many occasions – often with much laughter. But honestly, that event ended surfing for me ...because I no longer felt safe in the water the way I once had...even though nothing had happened that day. It's something I regret now – living so close to the ocean- because I let fear get the best of me.

Life can be this way. We can start out innocently and bravely enough in life, but then we experience pain, loss, trials, and fearful events that we never imagined. The fear that something may happen to us can grip us and cause us to stop living life to its fullest in all aspects, in our spiritual lives, in relationships, in careers, in life choices, you name it. And, according to the Scripture, fear can overtake us to the point that we stop living into the great call of God's Kingdom. Notice what comes immediately after Jesus saying, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Then he says, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." You see- we live in a fearful world, and we do well to take safety measures and precautions – but if fear grips us too tightly, it will prevent us from living out God's call. The ability to let go of fear is what allows us to live with a sense of radical generosity in order to care

for other people - the very people God has commanded us to care for over and over in the Bible: children, the poor, the stranger, the marginalized, the refugee, and, even our enemies. If fear is preventing us from carrying out God's call, then it's time to repent and turn back to God.

The remedy to fear is faith. The faith described today in our epistle to the Hebrews that reads, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." I like the way the REV translates it: "Faith gives substance to our hopes and convinces of the realities we do not see." It was faith that gave Abraham the ability to leave his homeland behind, not knowing where he was going, but trusting that God would lead the way to something better. Faith is a gift- and all we need to do is ask for it.

When we let go of fear and step out in faith, God goes with us. We can afford to take risks, we can afford to be generous, we can afford to share, we can afford to step out into the unknown. And we can do so in faith – and in doing so, experience life more abundantly. "Do not be afraid little flock."