

The two faces of fear

I Sam 25

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Let's begin with **the reading of the Word of the LORD from Psalm 27:1-5**

“The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?

When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.

Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.

One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.

For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Good words, written to comfort us, to encourage us, to remind us of truths we need to live by.

These words were written by a man who knew trouble. He had enemies who were out for his blood and he'd been hunted ruthlessly all over the Middle East, running for his life and narrowly escaping death more than once. Yet David, the psalmist, also trusted God and somehow had learned to trust him even in the most frightening of circumstances. He reminds us: God is an ever present help in trouble. A refuge and strength. A fortress. A light. Our salvation. **We have the Lord, the maker of heaven and of earth - of whom shall we be afraid?**

Put like that, you've got a point! Kind of puts things in perspective.

And yet if we were honest, most of us would have to admit that we are often afraid. Afraid of everything from spiders to world economic collapse to tripping and falling, to saying something out loud when I meant to just think it in my head. Oops!

Fear is an ever present reality because we live in a world where bad things

happen. And we have been taught to fight our fear, to suppress it, to deny it, to be ashamed of it.

And no wonder. Physical bravery and daring are worshiped in our culture.

I have a friend who recently went to Australia and was showing me her pictures. Interspersed with lots of nice scenery snapshots, there were photos of her sky diving (whoa! I said, “I’m scared of heights, that looks scary”); swimming with sharks (weren’t you afraid they might bite you?); and walking by 4 foot giant lizards with sharp pointy teeth (eek! I’d be scared of those).

Finally, she turns to me and says, with a bit of disdain,

“You’re afraid of a lot of things.”

That took me aback. And it actually hurt my feelings. I felt belittled, ashamed, embarrassed for having admitted my fears. I felt like I shouldn’t be fearful of giant lizards, jumping out of airplanes, or swimming with sharks. But wait: wouldn’t normal people be afraid of those things? Well, yeah, many would. But maybe they wouldn’t have admitted it. I guess I used my out loud voice when I saw her photos, and I should have kept my frightened reactions to myself.

Maybe I was BRAVE to admit that I was afraid of those things! Socially brave. Maybe?

And it is likely that a fear of heights is hardwired into us so that we won’t break our necks. A fear of large predatory animals with pointy teeth (like sharks) is there to preserve our lives. Is it possible that these are natural survival instincts and I’m just more in touch with them than she is? Is that bad? Maybe I’m just more in touch with my wild side...

Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” And that gets quoted out of context all the time. He was speaking in 1933, in the context of the Great Depression and general national despondency and low confidence and fear of oh, just about everything, so really, what he was saying was: “Buck up, people! It’s going to be o.k.!” Go out and start companies, invest in things, buy things, start over, have hope! In this context, fear itself was the thing to be feared, if you know what I mean.

But I digress.

I wonder if fear generally is fearsome. Should it be suppressed? Should we be afraid of fear?

Or maybe, just maybe, Fear is sometimes Good. Useful. Even – dare I say it – biblical. Maybe there is a good kind of fear, and a bad kind of fear. A fear that

moves you in the right direction, and a fear that moves you in the wrong direction. And maybe **fear is something that we should LISTEN to sometimes, because it's a kind of warning system that God puts into us to protect us from things that will hurt us.**

I was out horseback riding with your pastor, Kim, a few months ago, and we were talking about horses, falling off of horses, trying to avoid falling off of horses, and so on. It turns out that one of my hobbies these days is helping my friends shop for horses – when they are ready to buy a new horse - and part of what I help them do is recognize that the horse they need now, in this – usually “middle aged” stage of life – is not the horse they might have needed or wanted 10 or 20 years ago. Their reflexes have changed, they don't bounce like they used to, they aren't as daring any more, they need a smaller horse, etc., etc. The other thing I talk to them about is to listen to and pay attention to their fears about riding. In other words, if they get on a horse one day, and feel like, “hmm, things feel dicey today, like this horse is going to buck me off,” **GET OFF NOW** before you experience what we call an “unplanned dismount” and get injured. Possibly badly. What do we have to prove any more? Nothing. She who gets off today, lives to ride another day. I tell them: you have nothing to prove.

These are what I call the “Fears that keep you alive.” They are GOOD and USEFUL fears. WISE fears. They're similar to the fears that keep you from picking up a rattlesnake; or jumping off a cliff. Or swimming with sharks. Self-preservation fears. And yet we sometimes ignore these fears or override them. There is a difference between a horse and a rattlesnake, but – frankly – a 1200 lb horse can injure you just as badly. Maybe worse. He'll look cuter and sweeter up until the moment he crushes your back, but your injury will be longer lasting than a snakebite.

Most of us have fears. According to the source of all wisdom, the internet, these are the top 10 things people are afraid of, and I imagine that most of us have some of these fears:

#10: THE DENTIST: 9-20% of people avoid going to the Dentist because of anxiety or fear, according to Web MD. Well, yeah. I don't like it so much myself.

#9: DOGS: Often develops from having been bitten or having seen someone else bitten. Sad, but true.

#8 FLYING: This includes those who are claustrophobic about being inside an airplane's tight quarters and those, like me, who are afraid of plane crashes. My

fear is only triggered when things get a little rough in the skies... You don't want to sit next to me then.

#7 THUNDER AND LIGHTENING: Interesting, I thought only dogs and small children were afraid of these, but apparently this is much more common than we would think, just most people don't admit it. In one survey, 73% of college students had at least "a little bit" or "moderate" fear of weather. So let's just admit it! When it really crashes right around you, it IS kind of scary!

#6 THE DARK: This is a fear for almost all kids. They fear that something or someone will pop out from behind the closet door or under the bed. My daughter used to think that there was **a Moose in the closet**. Yes, you heard that right. A Moose. I have no idea why, but somehow she got that idea and she worried about it. **My son feared an Owl**. No, we did not live in the wilderness, but in suburbia, and I don't think they had ever seen either animal outside a storybook. Most of us outgrow the fear of the dark, but for those who still have this phobia, it's called NYCTOPHOBIA. It's always nice to enrich your vocabulary.

#5 HEIGHTS Fear of heights is one of the most common phobias, 3-5% of us suffer from it. If you have this fear, you know the weak at the knees, dizzy feeling you get at even the thought of heights, how you need to stay AWAY from the edge, how it bothers you even to see other people stand by the edge of a cliff or a building. Yes, I have it, and my kids and husband always laughed at me when I frantically said, "get away from the edge, you're too close," as they were standing, oh, 10 feet from the edge. And no, those of us who have can't just "get over it." We just can't.

#4 OTHER PEOPLE Social phobias encompass all kinds of things, from speaking in public to eating or drinking in front of others, to just a general anxiety when around anyone other than family members.

A study on public speaking found that:

One third of the respondents reported that they had excessive anxiety when they spoke to a large audience. Anxious thoughts about public speaking included the following fears: doing or saying something embarrassing (64%), one's mind going blank (74%), being unable to continue talking (63%), saying foolish things or not making sense (59%), and trembling, shaking, or showing other signs of anxiety (80%).

Lest you think that Pastors are any different, let me tell you that many if not most Pastors I have known have worried about the above things – and perhaps experienced them (not making sense, mind going blank, showing signs of anxiety, saying something embarrassing – yep, yep, yep). Many of us have social anxieties of one kind or another, and public speaking may be one of them. But we face our

fears and soldier on, for the good of the Kingdom of God. Amen.

#3 AGORAPHOBIA, which is intense fear or anxiety of any place or situation where escape might be difficult. Commonly feared spots and activities include: elevators, sporting events, bridges, public transportation, driving, shopping malls, and airplanes, according to the Mayo Clinic. This fear can lead a person to avoid leaving their home so that they will not be trapped in one of these places.

#2 SPIDERS! Women are 4 times more likely to be afraid of spiders than men. “In a study being published in the journal *Evolution and Human Behavior*, they found that 11-month-old girls quickly learned to associate images of spiders and snakes with a fearful facial expression, while baby boys did not.” Perhaps this is why Women are more afraid of bugs than Men – we’re trained from an early age by our greater ability to empathize with other’s reactions? Interesting.

#1 SNAKES: True confession. This top ten list came from an internet article, and each fear had its own page. When I got to the snake page, I had to quickly close the page because of the big picture of a fanged, hissing snake. You see, I have this phobia, and even the picture of the snake makes my palms sweaty and I feel anxious and kind of sick...I know there are good snakes, I know there are nice snakes, I just never, ever want to see them, o.k.?

So, out of that list of 10 fears, I have experienced, oh, most of them. Some of them even to the point that they influence what I do. For example, I will not walk through tall grass if I think there might be snakes there. I cannot walk near the edge of a tall cliff or tall building. Oh well.

However, before you dismiss me as a quivering mass of fears, remember that there are many forms of courage.

Don’t mistake physical courage for the only kind of courage or even the most important kind of courage. There are many challenges that will call for your courage.

It has been said, “Fear and Courage are brothers.” Or perhaps they are the two faces of fear. One does not truly demonstrate courage unless one has first been afraid. If you’re not afraid of something, what courage does it take to move forward? I named this talk, “The two faces of fear,” because I think we mistake Bravado for Bravery. Bravado is a pretense of courage, a swaggering of “I’m not afraid!”

True courage is looking our fear in the face and deciding to proceed forward in

some way.

Nelson Mandela said, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

Let’s look at a story from the Old Testament, of a woman who had both courage and fear, and a good measure of wisdom as well. Turn in your Bibles to I Samuel 25

The story begins in about v. 4...

David is not yet King of Israel. King Saul has been trying to kill David – out of jealousy, and because he is threatened by him, but for now there is some peace between them.

David at this time is in the desert and has been guarding the large property of a wealthy man named Nabal. When sheep shearing time comes, it is time for a feast and David asks that Nabal feed his men, who have been guarding the sheep and the workforce. It is a reasonable recompense. “We’ve been working and helping you, now feed us.”

Nabal refuses rudely (“who is this David? Why should I give him anything?”), and David is angry enough to order a retaliatory attack on Nabal’s household.

David has far more soldiers and he will win if he attacks. Nabal’s household will be wiped out.

Nabal’s wife, Abigail, hears what has happened and she is AFRAID, and with good reason! She knows that all the household males will be killed, and the women taken captive, probably raped, made into slaves, secondary wives if they’re lucky, servants. The situation is dire. So, her fear motivates her to action. She moves quickly to undo the damage Nabal has done and to placate David. Preparing a huge amount of food and drink (because she’s a practical woman!), she has servants load it on donkeys, and sends it ahead, following after. She does not tell her husband about any of this, lest he stop her.

Listen to what happens:

READ I Sam 25:23-28 AND 25:32-35

“When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground. She fell at his feet and said: “My lord, let the blame be on my alone. Pleas let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say. May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name – his name is Fool, and oflly goes with him. But as for me, your servant, I did not see the men my master sent.

Now since the LORD has kept you, my master, from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intended to harm my master be like Nabal. And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my master, be given to the men who follow you. Please forgive your servant's offense, for the LORD will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the LORD's battles. Let no wrongdoing be found in you as long as you live."

(32-35): "David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak. Then David accepted from her hand what she had brought him and said, "Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request."

Success! She humbles herself, begs for mercy, reminds David of the LORD, and of his future, and who he wants to be (which is not a man of needless bloodshed), and she is successful.

David hears her and has mercy.

Nabal, on the other hand, whose name means "fool" literally (can you imagine naming your child that? Why?) was indeed the fool in this story. **He had no fear when he SHOULD have had fear. He had BRAVADO!** One wonders if he wanted to look big and brave in front of his men, defying David. Rather than fear the REAL DANGER – which was David – he feared the crowd.

Nabal's foolhardy BRAVADO almost got everyone killed.

Abigail's rational fear SAVED her and the people.

Two faces of fear.

One pretends there is no danger, when there actually is. The other recognizes the danger and takes appropriate action.

I think back to my friend saying, "you're afraid of a lot of things..." and, well, yes, I am in a small, every day kind of way. I hate snakes and I really don't like spiders much, and some times I worry about things like car accidents and plane crashes and people not liking me.

But at least I admit it. And have the sense to avoid those things as much as I can.

But the big stuff? Things like: Disease, Death, Loneliness, Hardship, Suffering...

Well, for the most part, I'm o.k. with those things. Can't say I look forward to them, but I don't fear them like I fear snakes.

Why? How is a fearful person like me able to have confidence in the face of the Big Stuff of life?

Because My God is with me.

Remember the Psalm we read at the beginning of this talk?

The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?

He gives us courage when we need it to face the things we need to face. The courage to take action if action is needed.

To wait, if waiting is needed.

When the time comes, by God's grace, you'll be able to do whatever is needed in His strength as you trust in Him.

We all fear some thing, some time. I ran across an article on Vivos underground shelters, which promise to shelter you safely underground in the event of such catastrophe as pole shift, super volcanic eruption, solar flare, earthquake, tsunami, nuclear attack, bioterrorism, chemical warfare, and even widespread social anarchy. Of course, I immediately thought of the **old Far Side cartoon of the people in the bomb shelter while in the background you see the mushroom clouds. They're surrounded by cans of food, but the wife is saying the husband, "How many times did I say it, Harold? How many times? Make sure that bomb shelter's got a can opener. Not much good without a can opener, I said!"**

We can't prepare for every eventuality, but we do have the promise of God's presence and his peace, so fear not. God is with you.

Let's Pray