

## DO NOT FEAR, AND STILL WE DO!

Why are we afraid? Oh, who says that we are all afraid? For that matter, what do I mean when I used the word “Fear?” Is it really all that important to discuss in this format (a blog)? Let me answer the questions in the order I asked them.

1. Why are we afraid? I believe that being afraid is the appropriate when something big enough to eat us is chasing us. In other words, it has genuine survival value! I suspect that unless we are straying too close to the cage of some enormous shark, maybe a huge alligator or step into a pond filled with piranha fish we’re not likely to become some creature’s meal.



2. Who says that we are all afraid? Count me in as one of the people who admit that I have experienced fear several times in my life. However, sometimes we get so frightened about our well being, that of someone we love and even that of our nation that we don’t know how to cope. We either cannot or will not believe that the situation is as bad as it is. So we search for a way to cope. One of my favorite ways to cope (I have several) is to either pretend that something awful did not happen or will not happen. On a trip back to Maine 20 years or more ago, I said that I wanted to see a pastoral friend named “Ralph.” Jane listened and then sadly reminded me that “Ralph” had committed suicide the previous year. I had been too afraid to admit that he suffered that much. I may have felt some guilt or sadness at not being there to help him.

This kind of denial or repression can happen in a group or even to an entire nation. That was part of how many Americans, among others, coped for roughly 40 years (1949-1989)—a period otherwise known as the “Cold War.” When we faced the possibility of nuclear war, we assured each other that we would survive because of a policy summarized by the acronym “MAD.” “MAD” stood for “Mutually Assured Destruction.” During those years tens of millions of people went with their lives using whatever means they could to block it out. They/we/I were understandably afraid.

3. What do I mean when I used the word “Fear.” I mean an emotion that can be so powerful that it temporarily overwhelms our ability to think and to make wise choices. Sometimes the feelings are so strong that we don’t know whether to stand and fight or to run as far and as fast as we can. We do have some options. We can hide or “freeze” in place as some animals (as some deer) do or we can try to distract the threat. A mother quail did this with me. She pretended that she had a broken wing and had difficulty walking. It was a good technique to lure me away from her eggs.
4. The fourth question that should follow the first three is, “What do Christians believe about dealing with fear? The Bible is full of examples where people were afraid. Saul, the first king of Israel, did not handle his fear well at all. He was so afraid of the imminent battle with the Philistines (1 Samuel 28:3-20) that he violated one of his own rules. He consulted the Medium at Endor and asked her to “bring up” the spirit of Samuel who was dead. She

recognized Saul despite his disguise. He knew that what he was doing was wrong, but he was filled with fear.

For a long time I was confused about the meaning of the word “fear” as in the fear of God at least as it is used in the Bible. How can the word “Fear” as in the fear of God? Why should I be afraid of God? Over the years it seemed that the fear of God was based on a misunderstanding at least in English. In Hebrew, which is the language of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “yare” meant either reverence or fearing. When I learned that I felt much different about fearing the God. In the New Testament the Greek word “phobeo” is translated as to cause fear, to terrify. That kind of fear I don’t like at all. So there are different kinds or experiences of fear.

In one of the most beloved of prayers from the Old Testament, Psalm 23, we are reminded of reverence for God especially in vs. 4, “Yea though I walk through the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me. . . .” In psalm 27 the writer opens his prayer by proclaiming, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

In John 6:16-21 the disciples we’re making their way across the lake to Capernaum. The water was rough. “When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. But he said to them, ‘It is I; don’t be afraid.’” (Vs. 19-20 NIV) So, does that mean that Jesus is with us and therefore we can allow God to strengthen us for whatever is at hand or about to face us? Simply put, Yes. We can to choose to face our fears alone or we can trust God to be with us.

Two thousand years later we still experience fear. Sometimes it’s appropriate to seek counseling or therapy from licensed professionals. Sometimes praying is our best response—prayer for God’s will to be done—not ours. Medications, properly used, can check some of our fear. However, when I am awash in fear, I find that listening to music helps me to be calm enough to hear and to accept what God is calling me to do. Sometimes it’s a Christian hymn such as “Stand by Me” (# 512 in The UMC Hymnal, 1989) On other occasions I rely on listening to Gregorian chant, a form of music that has endured for a millennium. It calms my soul so that I make better choices about recognizing both what I am actually afraid of and where God is in the midst of my struggles.

We have not exhausted our choices about how to respond to fear—ours or that of other people. Some choices may not seem possible at any given time. Others may not seem helpful on our spiritual journey. A trained spiritual director can help to guide us with these decisions.

These can include making a spiritual pilgrimage, spending time on a directed retreat in a retreat center or working with a licensed pastoral counselor. Other options include attending worship while trusting God to speak through the Bible and the sacraments. The music, the prayers and the Christian fellowship of a congregation can also support us in dealing with our fears. The Church can help by establishing prayer groups to pray for the increasing levels of fear in our society. It can also help by connecting us with a prayer partner.

By God’s grace we are not left alone with our fears. God demonstrated God’s presence with us in the person of Jesus the Christ (Emmanuel; Matthew 1:23). God continues to offer a path through Christ and the grace to walk that path into eternal life. Amen.

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