

THE FEAR OF FEAR¹
I Corinthians 2: 1-10
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Is it right to think of having fear of fear? Can fear itself be the object of fear? I suspect that if the answer is “yes,” it is because we know how debilitating fear can be. We also know how energizing fear can be! We have all experienced what is called the “fight or flight” response to sudden fear: your heart pounding, your skin sweating, your stomach churning, your blood pressure rising. All of these are, of course, programmed into our nervous systems as a good thing. This kind of fear is a survival instinct that instantly prepares us for fight or flight.

I

So perhaps we should take a moment to tip our hat to the value of fear. We have generally thought together about fear as a bad thing; but there is such a thing as good fear. In fact, the only way to avoid fear altogether would be to avoid life altogether. We teach our young children to fear touching a hot stove for good reason. We teach them to fear crossing the street without looking, and later to fear making impulsive decisions. The value of fear is

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remarkable, even a necessity, for living our lives. We can embrace fear as a gift, as long as that fear is kept within its proper bounds.

One of the opposites of fear is hope, for fear looks at the future and sees only loss and pain and tears. Hope arises as one looks at the future with a faith that can see beyond any loss or pain or tears. Fear and hope describe two divergent ways of looking at the future. Do we face our future in terms of gratitude for life or in terms of dread for what may come? While we surely all feel some degree of fear and some degree of hope when looking ahead, one of the two will be more prominent in our approach to life, one of the two will determine our fundamental orientation toward the future.²

If it is fear, it will be easy to collapse into the mode of self-preservation at all costs. We become afraid to love unselfishly and will become glum and grumpy as our vulnerability becomes more apparent. If, on the other hand, our fundamental orientation toward life is hope, we will find ourselves able to embrace life as it comes, to love with abandon, and to trust that our future is in God's hands.

II

² Theologian Scott Bader-Saye refers to Thomas Aquinas as suggesting that one of the opposites of fear is hope. See Scott Bader-Saye, "Keeping Faith in a Fearful World," at www.atthispoint.net.

Living in a culture so dominated by fear, it is crucial that churches be intentional about cultivating hope. Hope is not arrogant. Did you notice the opening words of our scripture reading for today? Paul says to the church at Corinth: *When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.* He even admitted that he came to them *in weakness and in fear and in much trembling!*³

There is a vast difference between that humble approach to truth and the arrogance of some who claim to have all the answers, and all truth is tied up in a neat bundle. Such purveyors of absolute truth may attract large numbers of people who are searching for someone who seems to have all the answers, but it will not attract people who are thoughtful about the future.

What will attract thoughtful and honest people is a church that proclaims the gospel with a sense of humility, yet still claims that the future is in the hands of a loving God whose love is seen most fully in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That is the humble message we proclaim, and that message orients our lives away from fear and toward hope.

If Christian faith humbly proclaims that God's nature is seen most fully in Jesus Christ, then we will never think of God as an arbitrary tyrant who brings floods and tornadoes and tsunamis and earthquakes on humanity as a

³ I Corinthians 2: 1-3.

form of punishment for bad behavior. Rather, we will view God through the lens of Jesus Christ, and hear the invitation, *Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* If we understand the nature of God Christologically, we will have the courage to trust our futures to be in God's hands because Jesus was in God's hands when the worst happened to him!

That frees us to live joyfully, embracing the good, and risking faithfulness to something greater than our own comfort. Trusting our lives and our loves to God's care, we can release that tight grip of fear and move with confidence into God's future. As our scripture for today reminds us: *What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.*⁴

III

A stockbroker was once asked, "How are you making out these days?" He said, "Well, I find that I sleep like a baby at night—I wake up every couple of hours screaming!" Just the potential for fear has the ability to keep us awake at night.

This sermon, and this whole series of sermons on fear, is not meant to imply that we can eliminate all fear from our lives. I frankly do not know if anyone can live completely divorced from fear. Bad things happen, and we

⁴ I Corinthians 2: 9, loosely quoting Isaiah 64: 4.

fear those things. So I do not think it is possible to live without fear. But I do think it is possible to live beyond fear, because fear will always be there, waiting to constrict our throats and raise our blood pressure and turn our stomachs.

The novelist/theologian Frederich Buechner, whom I have quoted in earlier sermons, tells the story of seeing his daughter get up one morning. She runs to the refrigerator and gets a glass of water and a carrot stick. She was 15 years old. He thought that when she had this breakfast she was just being a teenager. But three years later she was in a hospital with a tube in her stomach and they were force-feeding her to keep her alive because of severe anorexia. These were fearful days for their family.

Buechner said that they would go to church hoping to hear something that would be helpful, but so often when they were really hurting they would hear a three-point sermon and pious platitudes concluding with a poem, or they would hear the preacher explain the meaning of certain Hebrew or Greek words. What they really wanted was a pastor and people who would stand with them and bleed with them because they hurt so badly.

In these fearful days I call upon us to have confidence in the gospel we proclaim. Like the old Apostle Paul, we may proclaim it *in weakness and in fear and in much trembling*, but proclaim it we will! And live it we will!

The old story will continue to bless and inspire, transform and revive. The old story will bring courage to fearful hearts, comfort to grieving hearts, and strength to trembling hearts. The gospel we proclaim will never grow old; it will be read and remembered, sung and prayed, preached and demonstrated, embraced and tweeted and text-messaged and i-podded until the end of time!

IV

We cannot live without some fear, but we can have confidence in that gospel. Churches may come and go; denominations may rise and fall; but those institutions are vehicles for the gospel, not the gospel itself. The gospel is the Good News of God for every generation. We proclaim that gospel with humility and gratitude, but not with fear. Our orientation is one of hope, and thus we are free to love.

No one of us needs to allow the fear of fear to keep us from doing what is right. Hope and courage are present when we are well aware of the worst that can happen, being scared almost to death, and then doing the right thing anyhow.