

Did you notice the use of the word fear/afraid in the passage in Matthew? It was used four times--“do not be afraid (5, 10); “For fear” (4) and “They left the tomb quickly and with fear” (10). Over the Sunday’s of Lent as they lead up to Easter I want to look at the concept of “fear” and ask what it means to us in 2008. What does it mean to “fear the Lord?”

Eugene Peterson in his book, Christ Plays in 10,000 Places writes: “...references to fear take place in a tradition of story-telling (the Hebrew culture and Scriptures) in which the word ‘fear’ is frequently used in a way that means far more and other than simply being scared. But, and here’s the thing, it *includes* all the emotions that accompany being scared—the disorientation, the not-knowing what is going to happen to me, the realization that there is far more here than I had any idea of. And that ‘more and other’ is God. When that happens, we begin to get in on the fear-of-the-Lord.”

How would you complete the sentence, Fear, the beginning of...? The Psalmist proclaimed “*The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid.*” This proclamation comes at a point in the Psalmist’s life when he is facing difficult days. The world seems to be falling down around him. His enemies are encamped outside waiting for him to make a false move. The whole world seems to have turned against him and yet he has a sense of peace and hope. A sense of peace and that all is going to be well fills his soul. His priority continues to be God and his prayer is that he will “*live in the house of the Lord forever.*” His faith says that somehow he will make it through these difficult days, relying not on his strength but on the strength that comes from the Lord. How can a person fear when their strength and hope comes from God?

It is interesting that fear often produces faith. We have all heard or said, “There are no atheists in fox holes.” Fear, in many ways, is healthy. I was always wary of fire personnel who were not afraid (or who did not respect) fire. A healthy fear of fire kept them on their toes. They were less likely to take foolish actions or take unnecessary risks. A healthy fear kept them aware of the situation around them and what was happening or could happen in the situation. Understanding that there are some situations in which we have no control is a healthy understanding. Fear is helpful in these situations: a healthy fear.

Fear often means that we also need to rely on those around us. We acknowledge a presence that is greater than we are. We acknowledge our need and dependence on others: Our need of a Savior.

As we look at the story in Matthew, our first encounter with fear is real fear. The knees knocking, heart racing, faint-hearted, scary type of fear. It was a shared fear. The soldiers experienced this worst kind of fear. It was also a

community fear. They were afraid. They did not know what to do...*they became as dead men.*

We were at a young camp in Eastern Maine. We had received word from the local Fish and Wildlife Department that bears had been sighted in the area and we should be extra cautious for a few days. One evening we were in the lodge with the campers when one of the staff came running in and said that there was a bear on the edge of the campus, near the cabins. We needed to do something. We garnered the weapons we had on hand: wiffle ball bats and badminton racquets! The men of the group headed out, armed and ready to drive off the intruder. As we approached the “location” there was a rustling in the bushes and I am not sure who made it back to the Lodge first! Finally we mustered our courage again and with knocking knees and hard beating hearts headed out to conquer our prey. As we approached the location there was the noise in the bushes again. It had not moved, it was in the same location and... it was happening at regular intervals. We were not that familiar with bears but we began to realize that probably a bear would not be rustling around in the bushes in the same location moving every 50 to 60 seconds. Our courage grew and we pointed our flashlights into the brush – and swoosh we found our “bear.” The water line to the bathrooms had broken. It was pumped up from the lake and when the pump built up enough pressure it “swooshed” the water out on to the bushes. Then when it lost pressure it stopped until the pressure was built up again. We had conquered! However, for a while, until we knew what the situation was, we were afraid.

All of us have things that produce an unreal sense of fear. For me, I am not proud to say, it is bats. I will not share a room with a bat. Well, a small room anyway. I did stay in a sanctuary one evening. Although I am not sure what the sermon was about because all my attention riveted to a bat circling the lights! But, I can guarantee you, that no matter how strong I plan on being, I will leave the room rather than share it with a bat!

Fear often pushes us to faith. Fear often pushes us to become more than self oriented. It asks us to move way from seeing only things in terms of ourselves and look at the larger scope of things. We need to see the wider picture of God working in the world. This was the response to the women’s fear in Matthew’s Gospel. The angel tells the women “*do not be afraid,*” something great is happening and you are a part of it. We have good news for you and for the community of faith you represent. You now have good news to share, HE IS RISEN. Your fear is changed to joy and celebration. Go and tell the disciples he has conquered your fears.

Now it takes a while for this to happen, “*they hurried away from the tomb, afraid and yet filled with joy.*” These two emotions are not usually mixed together: fear and joy. It will not be until Pentecost that the full impact of these moments turns their fear into a boldness to proclaim the story of the risen Christ to the world. It is a boldness that is also found in community, they were

gathered as One in the upper room. Their boldness is found in community with one another. There is a strength that comes when we are not alone, when we are together.

George Peck, former ABC missionary to Nagaland, India, tells of his leaving Nagaland. They were there in the midst of a rebel uprising and all foreigners were to be evacuated. George was on the last plane to leave. It was a time of fear and sorrow. They were concerned about what would happen to the church after they left. They were aware of their ability to leave and the fact that others could not. George says that as they arrived at their destination, another city in India, they were met by folks from the first groups that had been evacuated. He noted that as they landed and left the plane they were met by the other Christians who had been evacuated before them. He says that at that moment there was no question about denominational stripes, etc. Here were brothers and sisters bound by a love of Christ, a love for the people of Nagaland, after weeks of living fear, now together in a safe place. They found strength in one another and the courage to go on, overcoming fear with a boldness to continue to proclaim the love of God for all people. The Psalmist writes, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”* (111:10).

Eugene Peterson sums it up this way: “Fear-of-the-Lord keeps us on our toes in the play of creation, keeps our eyes open—something’s going on here and I don’t want to miss it. Fear-of-the-Lord prevents us from thinking we know it all and therefore from closing our minds or perceptions off from what is new. Fear-of-the-Lord prevents us from acting presumptuously and therefore destroying or violating some aspect of beauty or truth or goodness that we didn’t recognize or didn’t understand.”

The soldiers trembled with a paralyzing fear. The women knew that something greater than they could have ever imagined had happened, and with fear and awe they go and tell the disciples, who are hiding in fear, not be afraid—The risen Christ goes before you! Fear has been turned to joy. Fear, the beginning of faith.

Peterson, Eugene, *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005 (p.122)