

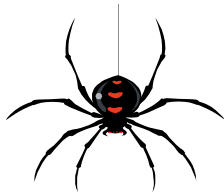
FEAR!

Final

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on Sunday, August 17, 2014

A Grilling to Remember

One of the many things that we fear in this world is bugs, and some of us have more such fears than others. I work with a woman who dislikes spiders despite the fact they're favorably characterized in "Charlotte's Web." The message: Don't kill spiders, and yet she does. I don't



share that opinion of spiders unless they're



very large,

but snakes, on the other hand, I don't like running into them. We all have experiences that we share with others as stories, as Art did last week. He had several stories to tell, and a lot of us were inspired to tell him our own stories. Last week's theme, of course, was dumb things that we might have done.

I too have many stories to pick among, but this week the sermon is about fear, and I have a story to tell about that. A couple of you have heard it, but I think it's worth the retelling, not only because the subject is fear but also because it caused the greatest fear in me.

Several weekends ago, I decided to grill a hot dog out in my backyard. I love hot dogs and grilling, although I've not done that much lately. Yes, I have lost some weight, but no, I am not



sick. This is discipline and exercise and not eating a lot of hot dogs and not drinking much soda and so on. I do miss them both, but I'll get off the topic if I start talking about my diet. Nevertheless, I was really looking forward to indulging myself. To me there's nothing better than an all-beef hot dog grilled outside, so I was thrilled to be out there.

Kitty, kitty in the **Grass**, what's in Your **Backyard?**

It was on a Sunday several weeks ago. I have many worship services on Sundays since I do one at church and then I go on to the homes and do a couple more. Having started up the grill, I was ready to eat.

Then I heard a rustling in the grass, but I thought nothing of it because there are many stray cats in my neighborhood, and you know I love cats. so I turned around and called, "Kitty, kitty."

And in the grass I saw a gray tail about three or four feet long and a creature came waddling

along toward me on stubby legs. **I SCREEEEEEEEA!MED!**

This was definitely not a cat. I wasn't sure what kind of monster it was, but I immediately just

knew it was an **ALLIGATOR!** It looked

like an alligator with its gaping jaws, and it moved like an alligator with a sort of waddling



motion on its stubby, crooked legs.

Being from New York City, I've heard that people can get these reptiles as pets, and then

somehow they escape from captivity. **I SCREEEEEEEECH!**

as I threw my hot-dog tongs way up high in the air and turned off the grill. I had the presence

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of mind to do that, and then I scrambled inside the house, slammed the door shut, and locked it.

Now Lee Stradley, a church member, knows this is all true because I texted him:

**THERE IS AN ALLIGATOR IN MY BACK-
YARD! I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!**

What I got back from Lee was LOL, laughing out loud about my fear.

Well I had to do something! So I called 9-1-1 because I really didn't know what else to do.

I have a fenced-in backyard. There is nowhere for this, whatever it is, to go. I don't really know how it got in. There is a little crack between the fence and the back of the garage of the person who lives behind me. That's probably where the creature came from.

So when I reached 9-1-1, you can imagine how I yelled:

**“THERE IS AN ALLIGATOR
IN MY BACKYARD!”**

The 9-1-1 operator came back at me very slowly and quietly, “An alligator? In your backyard?”

That's what he said, totally calm. But I was livid: **“I SWEAR!”**

“GET SOMEONE OVER HERE!”

It was a Sunday. You know Animal Control wasn't on duty, so the operator replied unctuously, "I'll send someone." But his phone got in the last word, "Click." So I'm pacing. I did not have the presence of mind to take a picture. I don't know why. Cameras and phones I have.

I waited      and waited.

The police finally showed up at my front door. Cautiously, the officer remarked while pulling on his gloves, "I'm intrigued." Summoning up what little bravado was left in my lungs, I said urgently:

**"THERE'S SOMETHING BACK THERE.
I'M SURE IT'S AN ALLIGATOR!"**

"O-o-o-o-kay" came a doubtful reply from the officer while unfolding what looked like a fragile stick barely big enough to fend off a Shih Tzu puppy. He goes to the back and unlocks the gate



while I beat a retreat. A few minutes later he returns with a big smile on his face:

"O-o-o-o-yeah. That's not an alligator. It's a giant iguana." So now I have a giant iguana in my backyard zoo, and it's big, four or five feet long.

I need backup, worried the officer. He seemed a little fearful himself.



My next-door neighbors, having just pulled in, said, "Oh, you just pick that thing up by the tail." I'm incredulous:

"Yeah? And do what with it?"

I'm not picking up a giant iguana by the tail. I can be brave, but not that brave. I was pacing again. The cop left to get backup. I was waiting for him. I was all wigged-out. I was afraid.

I crept on hands and knees to my back door, keeping out of sight. The door's locked, I hope. I look out the window:



“THERE IT IS! ON MY BACK STEPS!”

I had been feeding the stray cats, you see, and I had a bowl of cat food out there. That’s where my giant iguana was having its breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Now it was coming up those steps,

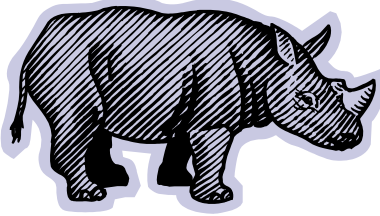
so I texted Lee again: **“IT’S ON MY BACK STEPS!”**

Maybe it was getting in! Maybe it could open the knob on the door! This might be the most creative iguana that ever lived!

The cats and I are hunkered down.

The cops finally come back. They had a cage big enough for a gorilla. It took a while, but they got the thing. It belonged to the neighbors behind my backyard, who own some exotic pets.

LET'S HOPE THEY DON'T COME UP WITH A BABY RHINO!



So I quickly bought a board from the hardware store and closed up that hole between my fence and the garage.

I thought about this shindig later, after everyone had stopped laughing at me and sending me hideous pictures of iguanas. Leslie, our church Office Manager, sent me a very nice picture from New York City of the Iguana Lounge. Thank you ever so much everyone, but I don't ever want to see another iguana. They look like dinosaurs. Hello! How many of us would have been brave with Mr. Iguana in the backyard? I was really very scared.

FEAR IS NOT KNOWING, NOT IN CONTROL



While thinking about my skirmish with the giant iguana, I decided to preach on the subject of fear and what it is that we fear. What lies underneath fear? Here's a partial list: Not knowing. I thought my opponent was a cat. Wrong. Not being in control. What's it going to do? What do I do with it? And the possible pain. Will it gnaw on your leg? Did it want the hot dog? What did it want? It turned out to be the cat food. That's the good news. However, I think they have teeth. And they're big. And they're reptiles. And so on. Fear was real that day. It's very funny now, but it was real.

Jesus and Peter on the Water

This is a classic story of fear, and it stands for something, as always. You don't have to believe this story literally, but think about what it means. Jesus has just received word that John the Baptist, his cousin, with whom he was raised, had been brutally murdered by Herod Antipas. So Jesus is distressed. He wants to go off by himself, but a huge crowd of people are following him, and he preaches to them. He heals them. He has them sit down. He feeds them miraculously. You remember the story.

When all that is over, Jesus really needs a break. So he goes up in the mountain to pray.



And he sends the disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the “other” side meaning the non-Jewish side of the sea. They were going to take a little minivacation. So off they go, and Jesus goes to pray. Later on, during the fourth watch of the night, Jesus joins them. In the middle of a storm, the little boat of the disciples is being bashed about. They are bailing, it out frantically, exhausted and terrified.

The disciples become more terrified when they see a figure approaching them on top of the water. Not something they see every day but highly symbolic. Only God can do this. Walking above the chaos represented by the water. Not bothered by the high waves, Jesus says what every heavenly figure says to every human being throughout time, including in the Bible: “Be not afraid. It is I.”

Peter speaks up as a kind of spokesperson for the impetuous. If I were Peter I would have said, “Okay, I’m coming out there.” But it wasn’t me; I didn’t do that. Peter said, “If it’s you, bid me to come to you.” And Jesus replied, “Come.” Peter gets out of the boat, and we notice he walked on the water too. He had God within, but he’s also human. He sees those waves. He feels that wind. He starts thinking, “What the heck am I doing? I can’t do this. I’m not God, I’m not Jesus.” Boom, he starts to sink. Jesus immediately reaches out his hand. He chides him for doubt, but he saves Peter nonetheless.

They got back in the boat. An expression of faith was made. Peter walked on the water too, but why did he sink? Those fears overwhelmed him – human fears that we all have. We know these storms are representative of all the stuff that happens in our lives when we’re not experiencing smooth sailing. Sometimes those waves are mighty high, or it’s nighttime and it’s windy. Literal storms as well as the storms of life.

We understand what Peter is thinking. We know why he’s afraid. We’ve all felt fear, and we’ve all needed help. This biblical story is about fear. And what manages fear is bravery and courage, which are not actually the opposite of fear, which is love. More on that next week.

Don’t Go in the Basement!

There are lots of examples of fear in movies. There are some people who absolutely adore scary movies. They’re delicious, aren’t they? They are a kind of virtual fear that we feel on behalf of the characters. *Don’t go in the basement! For God’s sake, why are you splitting up? What’s wrong with you? We all know what’s going to happen. Don’t go into separate rooms. Don’t go into the hidden tunnel.*

“The House on Haunted Hill.”



Remember that movie? I was a kid. Vincent Price invites a group of people to stay with him, and as they walk in, he gives them little mementos shaped like coffins. That’s your first symbol. I have to go, Vincent, I can’t stay. You’re giving me a little coffin-shaped box. I’m outta here. Yeah. “The House on Haunted Hill.” Really ridiculous, but as a kid I thought it was terribly scary. The man had an acid vat in his basement, which is never good. I don’t know what you would do with an acid vat, but yeah, just get outta there. The door’s locked. It is, you know, delicious.

One of the most recent and I think one of the finest scary movies ever made is “The Sixth Sense.” It really wasn’t gory; I don’t like gory films at all. But it was *scary*, and it was really well done. The whole thing was kind of like a riddle. You didn’t really notice that the first time you watched it, but at the end, you realize – I don’t think I’m giving anything away when I say

this – *he's dead!* The kids see his perspective because he sees dead people. It was just amazing! And then you noticed all the ringers that were seeded throughout the film as you watched.

I once showed “The Sixth Sense” to some fifth- and sixth-graders. I was a youth pastor at Northminster Presbyterian Church. When I realized I had just showed fifth- and sixth-graders an R-rated movie, talk about fear! What would their parents do to me? I had forgotten it was rated R. I think it had one swear word in it. But the kids *were terrified*. Later they played a game of hide-and-go-seek *in the basement!* *And you should have heard them then!* They had the best time ever, they told me the next morning. But then their parents started to call. *Well!* Anyway, I knew some fear then.

There are lots of movies like this. The most recent one I just watched was “Sharknado,” which I don’t recommend. “Sharknado” has to be the stupidest thing I have ever seen. It is funny, though. Tornadoes and sharks together. That doesn’t really happen, by the way. Please don’t worry about it.

Fear in Daily Life

You know we go to the movies, and fear is delicious when it’s on a movie screen. Not so delicious when an iguana is in your backyard, which is kind of ridiculous. We’ve all felt the fear of having a medical test. I call it wearing the paper robe. Nobody likes wearing paper robes. We’re all built to wear real clothes, and when we’re in the paper robe on the table, and stuck to that paper, and the doctor says something to us. Hm-m-m. Fear. It’s real fear.

I have a friend who was scheduled for tooth surgery, and she actually had to go into the hospital for this because it was her wisdom teeth. Anyway the nurse came in and said, “We’re going to start the IV soon; I’ll be right back.” And honest to God, my friend went berserk. “IV? I can’t

get an IV. I’m scared of needles.”



So she locked herself in the bathroom- and wouldn’t let the staff in. They weren’t amused. The doctor, the surgeon, the operating room had been scheduled, and so on. She had to pay quite a bit of money to reschedule all this, and finally get the IV. She was so frightened.

Needles. A lot of us don’t like them. I know nurses who pass out from needles. My brother used to tell me stories. He was seven years older than I, and of course, one of the stories he told that really stuck with me as a kid was what happens at midnight: The sun is at its farthest

distance from earth at the stroke of midnight. And you have to tuck your covers up under your chin because if you let them go down, you will freeze to death at the hour of midnight. For years I slept with my covers tucked under my chin just to make sure they didn't slip down at that hour. Every once in a while I still do it, but I kind of know that it won't happen.

You hear lots of stories. Urban legends have their basis in fear. I mentioned New York and alligators because once upon a time there actually was a story that people were getting baby alligators in Florida and bringing them back. Then the alligators would get out in the sewer system and come up through your toilet. Now who could believe that malarkey? But there were some who did.

It's not true, but I have a secretary at work who just said to me the other day, "Guess what? I heard about a friend of mine who had a snake, and it came up into her bathroom." I said, "Oh, you do not believe that. Please tell me." Here's the urban legend at work again, based on rumor and fallacy. It could be true, right? No, it really couldn't, but this is how urban legends gain currency. Fear in New York City. I remember it well. We never really thought about it, but we were always on alert.

Ebola is not an urban legend. I was watching a news story about it, and found that it is scary. People are brought into this country under highly stringent conditions of isolation. I felt myself becoming a little afraid while watching and hearing news reports about the 50-60 percent death rate of Ebola. How afraid should we be? Pandemics are possible. The Spanish flu killed 675,000 Americans in 1917.

The Opposite of Fear Is Love

When it comes to fear, we're all in the same boat together. And sometimes we are very afraid for all kinds of reasons: Not knowing, not being in control, possible pain, and possible damage.



What's the real opposite of fear? The Bible says, "Perfect love casts out fear." Love is the opposite of fear. That's what God within us and around us is all about. "Come to me," as Jesus said to Peter. You are not alone in this. I am right there within you and around you, and God is always with us, so loving God and loving each other are really the only answers to fear. Love and fear are the two basic emotions in life.

There are parents and loved ones who right now are sitting in a hospital waiting room expecting their beloved – their child, their husband, their wife, their mother, their father – to have that

operation, that surgery, that cancer treatment. People out there needing treatment are waiting in



fear, and we're waiting with them.

We're with the soldier who's walking tensely down a village street in Afghanistan, gripping his or her rifle in fear. We're with a tired mother who is making breakfast this morning on a shoestring, looking at her kids and wondering if the money and the food are going to hold out until payday.

We're all in this boat together, eyes on the horizon, doing the best we can, with God and with each other heading for home.

Amen.