

A TOUCH OF EASTER

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on November 27, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Biblical Thoughts about Fear

“Have I not commanded you: ‘Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.’” (First chapter of Joshua, verse 9, as they enter the holy land.)

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (First John, Chapter 4, verse 18.)

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” (Twenty-Third Psalm, verse 4.)

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered, so don’t be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.” (Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, verses 29-31.)

“For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (Second Timothy, chapter 1, verse 7.)

“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.’” (Gospel of Luke, Chapter 1, verses 30-31.)

Secular Thoughts about Fear

To change the mood a little, here is a teenage boy telling his story:

“I was thirteen years old, trying to teach my six-year-old sister how to dive into a swimming pool from the side of the pool. It was taking quite a while, as my sister was really nervous about it. We were at a big public pool, and nearby there was a woman, an old lady about 75 years old, slowly swimming laps.

“Occasionally, she would stop and watch us. Finally, she swam over to us, just as I was putting on the pressure, trying to get my sister to dive. She was shouting, ‘I’m afraid, I’m so afraid.’ The old woman looked at my sister, raised her fist in the air defiantly and said, ‘So be afraid. Just do it anyway.’”

If you ask people what is the opposite of love, nine out of ten will say, “Hate.” Yet two of the spiritual works that have informed my spiritual discipline for the last twenty years say otherwise. They avow that the opposite of love is fear. The rationale behind this thought is that fear is the deeper emotion, that people don’t hate unless they also fear inwardly.

I’ve had a little experience with fear in my life. When I was a young man, I nearly died

five times within one calendar year. Three out of the five were close calls. I almost went over a waterfall once, to land on jagged rocks below. This was the closest experience of all. I was really lucky, and my body would not have been found for a long time. I also fell down a ravine that year. That one too was very close.

Aloft in a Plane, the Engine Conks out

The third close one was when I was in a single-engine airplane with a friend when the engine stopped. We managed to glide into the Binghamton airport with all the emergency vehicles out there on the tarmac, waiting for us and ready to put out a fire. We were just beginning our approach, maybe ten miles out, having flown in from Vermont, when the engine stopped. It seemed as though it was pretty cool, actually, but it could have ended differently.

I've seen fear in the eyes of many people: Spouses when they learn that their loved ones have just had a stroke or a heart attack. Usually they're being stoic, strong, but you can still see it in their eyes. I've seen it in the eyes of a woman who had two miscarriages late in the second trimester, and she just learned that she was pregnant again.

I've heard fear in the voice of one of my sisters. Our basement, when we were kids, was creepy and scary to them, but to me it was wonderful. It was my very first man-cave. Two things were strange about the cellar: The switch to turn on the lights in the basement was at the bottom of the steps, so you had to descend into the darkness before you could turn on the lights. Mom made dad change that. Also, the steps leading from the kitchen down into the basement didn't have risers on the back of them, so you could see right through the steps.

Scaring the Bejesus out of Sis

One time I'm playing down in the basement, and I hear my mom upstairs tell one of my sisters to go down and get something to bring up from the basement. I turn off all the lights, and then I go and hide behind the steps. And I wait. My sister is creeping down the steps, and at the right moment, I grabbed her ankles. (I'm sorry, but at the time, I'm actually a bit proud of my plan.)

I didn't grab them in such a way as to trip her. It was only to grab and then let go, just to scare the bejesus out of her, which it did. Teenage girls have an ability to produce an earsplitting scream, but she did not. Her scream was guttural; it was low. It was an UNNH!! kind of thing as she leapt the remaining five steps or so into the darkness, skipping the light switch and rolling off into the darkness with this guttural scream. It was raw terror on her part. Later, I was forced to apologize to my shaken sister.

I'm generally not a fearful person myself. But I can't handle horror movies. When *Silence of the Lambs* came out in video, Tracy and I, along with another couple, were watching it, and there's one scene, which I'm not going to describe whatsoever, but there was one scene in which something inside me snapped.

At the time, fortunately for me, we had a litter of puppies from our beautiful Labrador Retriever. They were outside in a little fenced-in area. And so I ran outside, jumped the fence, and lay down on my back to be covered with ten little puppies. It was a great cure for that horror scene. It was, of course, a little embarrassing when I came back into the house, but I say, when you need puppies, you need puppies.

What Spiritual Works Say on Love & Fear

Here's what those two spiritual works [mentioned on page 1] say about love and fear: The first is from *A Course in Miracles*, the group that meets on Wednesday nights:

“The opposite of love is fear, but what is all-encompassing can have no opposite. The presence of fear is a sure sign that you are trusting in your own strength. The awareness that there is nothing to fear shows that somewhere in your mind, though not necessarily in a place you recognize as yet, you have remembered God, and let his strength take the place of your weakness. The instant you are willing to do this, there is indeed nothing to fear.”

The other spiritual work is from *Conversations with God*, the group that meets on Thursday nights:

“All human actions are motivated at their deepest level by two emotions, fear or love. In truth, there are only two emotions, only two words in the language of the soul. Fear wraps our bodies in clothing. Love allows us to stand naked. Fear clings to and clutches all that we have. Love gives all that we have away. Fear holds close. Love holds dear. Fear grasps. Love lets go. Fear rankles. Love soothes. Fear attacks. Love amends.”

An Extremely Powerful Movie Scene

I'm going to try to do justice to it, in order to portray something very important about fear. It's from the movie with Madeleine Stowe and Mel Gibson as husband and wife in *We Were Soldiers*, 2002. He, Mel Gibson, is a colonel in Vietnam, and she, Madeline

Stowe, is at their small home on a military base back in the United States.

In the scene, she is looking at a photo of her husband, and draped over the picture frame are her rosary beads, offering a sort of continual prayer for his safety. In this scene, she picks up the photo and is holding the beads, when she looks out of the corner of her eye and sees a cab pull up. The driver gets out and comes toward her house.

The doorbell rings, and holding this picture and these beads she sort of slumps to the floor and, in a scene of superb acting, she has a look on her face of unmitigated terror, knowing that she is about to hear the worst news of her life. But then she steels herself, gets up, and goes to the door. Here's the dialogue:

The cab driver, holding a Western Union telegram: “Mrs. Moore, Colonel Moore's wife?”

Mrs. Moore: “Yes.”

Cab driver: “I need help finding an address. I'm looking for”

Mrs. Moore: She realizes it's not the news she was about to receive, and she shouts at him, “You jackass! Do you know what this is? Do you know what you just did to me?”

Cab driver: Like a scolded dog, he hangs his head and turns toward the car. Then a few steps away, he turns back and says very solemnly, “I don't like this job, ma'am. Just tryin' to do it.” And turns and walks toward the car.

Mrs. Moore: A pregnant pause. Then she says, “Wait, wait.” And she runs out to him and looks at the name on the envelope and says, “I'll take it to

her. And tell the cab company that, if there are any others, just bring them to me.”

And the Angel Gabriel said to Mary, Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you. But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, Don't be afraid, Mary.

Here's the Point of All These Stories

We've looked at a lot of aspects about fear, some serious and some silly, but let me highlight one aspect from that old lady swimming, “So be afraid and then do it anyway!” Potentially, she was teaching a six-year-old one of the most important lessons of a lifetime:

It's okay to be afraid. Just don't let the fear get in your way. “And tell the cab company that, if there are any others, just bring them to me.”

During the Vietnam era, that was the way, at least initially, that the government notified wives that their husbands had been killed. A cab driver with a telegram. And the impersonal coldness in Madeleine Stowe's portrayal led to the incalculable benefit of changing that system.

But to use theological language, by pushing through the fear, the anger, by telling the cab driver to “Wait, wait” and to bring the telegrams to her so that she and her friends could then hand-deliver them to the widows. They could be with the widows in their grief by helping them through that fear.

By doing so, she was able to introduce a bit of Easter, a bit of life brought into their valley of the shadow of death.

Do we have any clue as to how frightened Mary might have been? Scholarship informs us that she was probably a teenager. And so this young girl receives a heavenly visitation, and it's clear that the angel's first job is to calm her down. The Biblical language is clearly sanitized, but she is deeply frightened. “Don't be afraid, Mary.”

And with her pushing through the fear that easily could have been overwhelming, she allowed not just the birth of a child but the birth of a message of hope, a message of peace, a message of love that would endure through the ages. The result of subjugating her natural fear has been the birth of a touchstone for all people of goodwill to order and direct their lives.

A Bit of Easter Just prior to Christmas

And now let me conclude with one of the best thoughts of all time by Marianne Williamson, which she wrote a while ago:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous.

Actually, who are you not to be. You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are meant to shine as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us. It is in everyone and as we let our own light shine, we

unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Amen and amen.