

Overcoming the Fear of the Unknown

1st Weekend in Lent – Color: Purple – February 12/13, 2005
Sermon Background Study

“For God did not give us a spirit of fear,
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

Numbers 13:30-14:4 (NRSV)

³⁰But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we.” ³²So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. ³³There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ²And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴So they said to one another, “Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.”

Luke 8:22-25 (NRSV)

²²One day he [Jesus] got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side of the lake.” So they put out, ²³and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. ²⁴They went to him and woke him up, shouting, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵He said to them, “Where is your faith?” They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?”

“What do you fear?”

Imagine a life without fear, worry, or anxiety. Though God wishes such a life for us, freedom from anxiety often seems beyond our grasp. During this Lenten season, we'll seek to overcome the fears that plague us.

The unknown. If we stop to think about it, our lives are pretty much one large pile of unknowns. We take risks of one sort or another every day of our lives. Most of these unknowns don't trouble us at all and if they do, we deal with them easily. But sometimes, we face an unknown that terrifies us, paralyzes us, and robs of us whatever peace of mind we might have enjoyed. Such an unknown can cause us to make terrible¹ decisions.

Trust or turn back?

Today's passage from the book of Numbers tells the story of a choice the Israelites had to make after escaping from slavery in Egypt. After they had fled across the Red Sea, God led Moses and the people to Mt. Sinai where God laid out the covenant within which God and the people would live together. God gave them a set of instructions for what it means to love God and to love neighbor, including the Ten Commandments. God gave them instructions to build a moveable home in which God would dwell with them. And God led them from Mt. Sinai to the borders of Canaan so that the Israelites might

What is the Opposite of Faith?

The disciples panic during the storm and Jesus scolds them for their lack of faith. Fear & faith. We sometimes tend to think that doubt is the opposite of faith, but Fred Craddock suggests that, as in this story, fear is the opposite of faith. Part of this is a language problem.

We translate the Greek word, *pistis*, as “faith.” Regrettably, though *pistis* has a verb form, “faith” does not. No one says, “I faithed yesterday.” This is too bad, because Bible translations use “believe” as the verb form of “faith,” even though “believe” speaks to a state of mind, including an opinion. Similarly, “doubt” refers to a state of mind. But the best synonym for “faith” is “trust.” Faith speaks more to matters of the heart than does belief. It is not so much, “what do you think?” as it is “whom do you trust?”

When the disciples panic, it is a lack of trust that leads to their fear. Despite all that they have seen and heard from Jesus, they don't really trust enough to put their lives in Jesus' hand.

¹“Terrify,” “terror,” “terrible,” and “terrific” are from the same Latin root, *terribilis*, meaning “to frighten.”

move into the land that God had promised to Abraham centuries before. Yet despite all this, the people seemed plagued and troubled by fears, doubts, and anxieties, sometimes even going so far as to wish they were still back in Egypt. Time and again, they quickly forgot about their escape from Pharaoh and even the food God had rained down upon them from heaven (Exodus 16). Instead, they could see only the unknowns ahead and embrace only their own fears.

When the Israelites arrived at the borders of Canaan, at God's instruction they sent in a team of spies to check things out. Sensible enough. However, when the spies returned after forty days, they reported that though the land flowed with "milk and honey," the Canaanites were simply too strong and as big as giants. In their fear, the people turned back, some even desiring to return to Egypt. Despite their experiences *with* God, their experience *of* God, their faith was weak. They trusted God too little. They weren't really sure that God would or could keep his promises. Indeed, their faith was not really placed in Yahweh, the God of Moses. Rather, their faith was in a god of their own making, a god much too small to trust with life and death. So, led astray by this tiny god of their own conception, the people would wander aimlessly for forty years until they had died, until their children were ready to trust, *fully* trust, the God-Who-Is and begin their conquest of Canaan.

Trust or panic?

Jesus' disciples were faced with big unknowns of their own and, regrettably, their response was often little better than the Israelites at the borders of Canaan. As told by Luke, one day Jesus and some of his disciples got into a boat to make the trip across the Sea of Galilee. It is a pretty big inland sea and Jesus fell asleep while making the trip. Because the hills encircling the sea are unusually steep (1200-1400 feet above the surface of the sea), storms come up quickly, and a real nasty one did so while Jesus slept. As we might, the disciples panicked, waking Jesus up as they screamed for their lives. Jesus promptly did two things. First, he "rebuked" the wind and the waves, bringing calm back to the sea.² Second, he admonished his disciples for their lack of faith. But the disciples have only traded one fear for another. They had been terrified by the storm, but now they were afraid of a new unknown. "Who is this?" they ask. Jesus commands even the winds and the water! "*Who is this?*"

The disciples fear the storm because their faith in, their trust of, Jesus is weak and feeble. They fear the demonstration of Jesus' authority because they do not really comprehend who it is that they claim to follow. The disciples are like the Israelites who turned back from Canaan, in that the disciples' conception of Jesus is too small. Their minds and hearts will require some significant expanding if they are to grasp who Jesus really is and trust him enough to set aside all their fears.

A god³ too small

When working on this series on fear, I popped into Rev. Daniel Gowan's office for some advice. Daniel is an ordained Presbyterian minister and a trained counselor and therapist. He is on staff at St. Andrew in our counseling ministries. I asked Daniel for a good book on overcoming our fears. I figured it would be something like, *The Bible's Ten Steps to Conquering Your Fears*. But no. Instead, Daniel quickly urged me to pick up J.B. Phillips', *Your God Is Too Small*, a slender volume written more than a half-century ago.⁴ After working on this study, I think understand a little better Daniel's recommendation. Underlying the fear of the Israelites was their lack of trust that God could actually keep his promises despite the presence of giants in Canaan. Yahweh might be their God, but, they asked themselves, was he *really* more powerful than all the other gods on the block? Jesus might be the disciples' Master and Teacher, but did he *really* have authority over all creation, including the demons in the sea? These people feared the unknown because their gods were too small.

²This will have to wait for another time to fully explore, but notice that Jesus rebukes the wind and waves. For many of the ancients, demons inhabited the sea, causing storms and other problems. This was especially true for the Jews, for whom the sea was a symbol of chaos and terror. This story is not about Jesus' power over nature, as we often think. This is the story of an exorcism!! Hence, the personal "rebuke." Look at Luke 4:39, where Jesus "rebukes" a fever to save Simon's mother-in-law. Surprising stuff.

³The lower-case "god" is not a typo. In my writing, I reserve "God" to speak of the one true God ~ the God of Abraham, the God of Israel - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All the other supposed gods of this world and of our lives get the lower-case! This follows Bible translations such as the NRSV. See Exodus 20:2-3, for example.

⁴I will be using some of Phillips' book in the upcoming studies. He has a great way of helping us see the many ways we shrink our understanding of God. *Your God Is Too Small* will be my March book recommendation as well.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on the fears of God's people)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Exodus 16 The people have fled Egypt but now fear starvation in the wilderness. They need not.</p>	<p>Day 2 Joshua 10 Joshua and his soldiers fear the opposing armies (v. 8). They need not.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Samuel 17 All Israel fears Goliath. They need not.</p>	<p>Day 4 Isaiah 61 & 62 Living in exile, the people fear that God has abandoned them forever. They need not.</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 7:54-8:1 Stephen faces death by stoning, but is unafraid! By the power of the Holy Spirit, his God is plenty big.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

February Book Recommendation

The Jesus I Never Knew by Philip Yancey

This month's selection is another book about Jesus and one of the best. Philip Yancey is a writer who never disappoints me. Though a lifelong Christian, Yancey only recently took a long, hard look at the Jesus described in the Gospels. He found, as I have found, a very different Jesus from the one he learned about in Sunday School – more comforting and more terrifying. Yancey's faith was strengthened by the writing of this book. Yours will be strengthened by the reading of it.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Don't forget to check out our Center for Christian Learning website!

www.standrewccl.org

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today, we begin a series of fear. A good starting place would be to consider the fears that we face. What do you find most fearful in your life? Terrorists? Cancer? Financial problems? Job loss? Pressures on your children? When you consider these fears, do you find any themes? Perhaps your fears seem more "mundane." What effect do these fears have on your day-to-day life? How do you deal with fear and anxiety? Why do you think that anxiety medications are among the most-prescribed in our country, the most prosperous on the planet.
2. In the page one text box, I claim that the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is fear. Does this seem less than obvious? Have you ever thought about it this way? Do you agree? How might this reshape our understanding of our fears and anxieties?
3. The story from Luke revolves around Jesus' identity. Why does Jesus' identity matter . . . to them or to us? Sometimes, Christians are tempted to say that only Jesus' teachings really matter. Certainly, Jesus shows us the way to live in right relationship with God and one another, but can we separate the teacher from the teachings? Christians proclaim that Jesus is fully and completely human and fully and completely divine. We don't try to explain how this could be; only that it is so. What difference does this proclamation make in our struggle to live as Christians day to day? What difference would this proclamation have made to the disciples in the boat that day? What difference would it make in your life if Jesus had been a wise teacher, but not God himself?