

## **Faith or Paralysis by Fear**

**1 John 4:13-21**

**(Third Sunday in Lent – February 24, 2008)**

9/11 definitely changed the emotional climate in this country. The enormity of the act of taking down those twin towers and the loss of life involved made such an impact on the psyche of our country that we still react with fear and trepidation about the possibilities of acts of terrorism. Politicians have used 9/11 in manipulative ways to support actions that abridge our civil rights. So this climate of fear is still a part of our secular society, and I would like to think with you about “faith” in this climate.

A woman awakened her husband one night at 2:00 a.m. telling him that **THIS TIME** she was absolutely certain she had heard a burglar moving around downstairs. The husband, who had been through this many times before, was doubtful. Still, he dragged himself out of bed and stumbled down the stairs. Suddenly there was a flashlight in his face and the muzzle of a handgun pressed against his ribs. In a menacing whisper, the burglar warned that if he wished to continue living he had better not make a sound or try anything heroic.

The husband readily assured the burglar that he would give him no trouble whatsoever on one condition. The condition was that the burglar come with him for a moment. He explained: “My wife has been expecting you every night for more than twenty years. I want her to meet you now that you’re finally here.”

You can see where this husband was coming from, can’t you? As unpleasant and menacing as was this real-life, flesh-and-blood burglar, he was nothing compared to the disembodied specter of “burglarness” that his wife had made a part of their nights for twenty years. The real burglar would merely grab a few things and soon be gone. The husband’s hope was that if his wife saw the real thing, that then the “other burglar” -- the one that for all of these years had terrorized his wife’s fantasies and tormented her soul from within, might go away.

It probably didn’t work, but it does touch upon the distorting hold that fears and anxieties have upon our lives. And it isn’t, obviously, that there aren’t some things in life of which to be afraid.

Though its forms are usually less bizarre and less comical than hers, overfed fears (like those that cripple the spirits of us human beings) are terribly common. The amount of thought, of anxiety, of imagination, and, yes, of lost sleep that are invested in, for example,

possible illnesses that haven't happened but theoretically could; in contemplating terrible embarrassments or humiliations that could be waiting in the wings about to happen; in worrying about tragedies and disasters that might suddenly overtake one; in imagining possible old mistakes that could be about to catch up with you, is downright awesome. Chronic, delusional and illogical fears do seem able, all too easily, to rob us human beings of personal peace, to suck away our confidence and to smother our joy. Often starting when we're quite young, our catalogue of fears begins to grow and expand along with our knowledge to become a daunting and debilitating disease of the spirit.

Shel Silverstein, in one of his children's poems, vividly reminds us of how some of us started torturing ourselves like that in our early years. It says, "Last night, while I lay thinking there, some what-ifs crawled inside my ear, and pranced and partied all night long and sang their same old what-if song: What if I'm dumb in school? What if they've closed the swimming pool? What if I get beat up? What if there's poison in my cup? What if I start to cry? What if I get sick and die? What if I flunk the test? What if green hair grows on my chest? What if I tear my pants? What if I never learn to dance? Everything seems all swell and then the nighttime what-ifs strike again! What if nobody likes me? What if a bolt of lightning strikes me? What if I don't grow taller? What if my head starts getting smaller? What if the fish don't bite? What if the wind tears up my kite? What if they start a war? ...etc., etc.

Surely you recall some of those. Many of them seemed to come "out of the blue." We hadn't lived long enough yet to have any direct experience of what nevertheless terrorized us as children.

Then too, a lot of the habit of fearing is deliberately fed to us and awakened within us in order to control us or exploit us. When one reflects upon it, how much of advertising is based on just that: creating negative possibilities in our minds, then to sell us protection from whatever it is? Garrison Keillor, on his *Prairie Home Companion* Show, used to have a regular segment in which he advertised for an imaginary store catering to fear-haunted people. It was called "The Fear-Monger Shop." One of the ads for fear-monger products said, "Yes, the world is full of big, hairy spiders with large hairy legs. They move all over through the world – mostly in places where we never see them so we never really know that they are there. Even if you keep your house really clean and you brush away all those cobwebs up in the corner of the dining room, they're there! They're down in the basement. You probably know that when you go down there. But that doesn't mean that they always STAY in the basement – especially

when you go to sleep at night. They know you're asleep. And that's when those big hairy spiders with their hairy legs come slowly crawling up the stairs and through the living room and into the bedroom and up (shudder) – up right on to your covers and over your arm, crawling right up on your face.

**THAT'S WHY** you need a bed net from the Fear-Monger Shop. It's a tight steel mesh net that fits right over the bed. You tuck it in when you go to bed – all four sides. Only then will you be safe all night. Stop in, first thing tomorrow, at the Fear Monger-Shop.

Beneath the bald absurdity of that spoof lives the fact that in addition to self-generated fear, much of our advertising industry works full time on ways to make us afraid, insecure and uncertain. Silverstein could easily have written a parallel poem with lines like: What if my breath is bad? What if my teeth don't shine? What if bacteria are wildly breeding in some unattended corner of the kitchen or bathroom? What if I run out of money before I die? What if I am deficient in some obscure vitamin? What if my salad oil contains carcinogenic additives? What if my clothes look out of date? What if harsh shampoo is ruining my hair? What if I'm under-insured and get sued? What if I no longer appear youthful?

So we part with our money to purchase the supposed protection because it seems better to use a few dollars to go through the charade of buying off any fears that can be bought off.

But now we are here as people of faith, right? One might think that we, therefore, would have no such problem – that faith is an automatic, sure-and-certain antidote to any fear.

It would be nice if it were but it really isn't. Faith isn't an antidote to anything that is real in life. This is the first matter to be faced. The fact is that scary things do happen in our world. There are genuinely frightening dangers, threats and ordeals that do become a part of human life. Religious gimmicks that are supposed to wipe away all fear are just that: gimmicks. Our capacity for fear is part of our self-preservation instinct. It's for our own good that we have the capacity for fear, and nowhere does the Bible try to browbeat us out of it.

Not only is our ability to be afraid, at its best, important and necessary to our living. Often it is a vital part of the truth about what is happening – a part to which you and I need to listen. So don't assume that to be afraid is an automatic failure of courage and character, nor that bravado is an automatic sign of character. Our fear of what, right now, is threatening, is dangerous, is terrifying, is no more than our minds working and reacting in precisely the way God intended.

The problem comes at the next level of fearing -- in the things that we infer from what we fear. Once frightened for good reason, how do I know, for example, that this isn't only the tip of the iceberg, that there aren't mystical, unseen, mysterious, relentless, forces with a lot more in store for me? Burglary had become just that for that woman in the opening story; a dark, omnipresent force astride in the nights of her life. She fed it till it became much larger, more powerful and more ominous than any two-bit burglar could ever be. Burglars take silverware and furs. She had managed to rob herself of more than 7,000 nights of her adult life.

There is a line in that familiar old 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that has to do with the difference. It's the one where it says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Did you catch that? It didn't say that I will not be afraid. It said, "I will fear NO EVIL. THAT'S the principle here: avoiding our taking our fear to the next, somewhat crazy level. That happens in several common ways.

For example, another instance of "fearing evil" is when whatever frightened you or me is taken to mean that my luck is now changing, or that my astrological situation has become negative or that I'm out of sync with some numerology or biorhythms that pull the strings governing my life. That is a whole lot more than only fearing what is fearful. It is to be self-terrorized by specters of larger, darker forces astride in the universe, poised to victimize me.

The more religious equivalent of that brand of fearing evil is the all-too-familiar fear that what is coming toward you is quite likely God's punishment for your past sins. This is an especially nasty form of fearing evil, because it makes God the enemy. For those who do that to themselves, God then, is the terrorizer, imagined just now to be getting around to getting back at you. It too is a next-level form of fear, borne partly of guilt but also out of an asinine concept of God.

In addition, though, to not imagining secondary, beyond-the-scenes, insidious forces, there is another important part of managing fear. It is learning not to act our way into embellishing it. Every time, for example, that wife made her husband get up and go downstairs to look for an intruder, she fueled her fear, not quieted it. It works that way. When, in our alarm, we pile on protection upon protection, when caution and safety become the overriding obsession, when we start withdrawing, panicking and throwing money at our fears, we empower them. And to empower the demons that haunt us is pretty stupid.

A last part of the matter is that which has most to do with our faith: the absolute importance of cultivating a strong sense of God's presence with us in all of life – not only the pleasant, rewarding, inspiring or religious ones but every bit as much in the disconcerting, unnerving episodes. Once more, it won't get rid of any fear that is there for solid and legitimate reasons. It will, though, prevent that awful sense of desperation, despair and dread that makes fear become so crippling and disorienting. Knowing that, as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm says, God is still involved with you and with me in even the most terrifying times of life, is the difference between feeling trapped like an animal in some black hole, rather than merely traveling for a time, through a dark valley. Whether it's the fear of possible failure, being frightened by a serious illness, dreading an approaching divorce, terror of dying, humiliation, cataclysm or whatever, the sense that you and God are living and moving through it together is a totally different experience than that of imagining that everything has now gone out of control or turned against you or that you're on some relentless course toward disaster. It doesn't require being a spiritual hero – only mustering enough faith to trust that sufficient courage and light will be there when and as needed.

Yes, if we don't get in its way, there is a strange, internal calm – the one that the Bible describes as a peace that passes understanding – that allows us to get our sleep until the night the burglar actually shows up. It's a holy confidence that enables a person fully to embrace today's good and today's joy and not have it sucked away by fearing what tomorrow could conceivably bring. It is to trust that the dark valleys are only incidents, not tragic endings or humiliations – unless, in panic, we make them that way.

So, are we going to continue to be afraid amidst the crises, dangers, threats, precarious situations that come our way? I hope so. Fear is important. Without it we'll imperil ourselves and everyone around us. BUT are our fears going to demoralize us, paralyze us and plunge us into some kind of neurotic, paranoid, siege mentality? I would hope not. If that happens, it's because we let it happen, do so by borrowing trouble from a future that isn't here yet, by fearing the work of evil forces that aren't out there, and by assuming that the God who created us didn't bother to equip us to deal with the very life and time given us. To believe that is an insult to God and can make you really crazy.