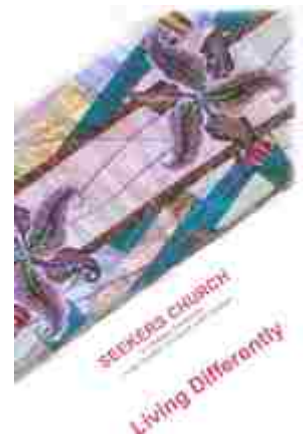


“Dancing with Fear” by Pat Conover



My stories of fear jump first to the three times I've been on the wrong side of a gun. No shots were fired but it sure focused my consciousness. My memories of each incident remain bright: one with the police, one a misunderstanding with a homeowner, and one a chance encounter with the Blackstone Rangers. I remember being stalked by a criminal sub-group of the Chicago Mafia, a confrontation inside a big delapidated apartment building with an angry group of Blackstone Rangers who felt they had and deserved control of the building. I remember being afraid of sectors of the police forces in Chicago and in Tallahassee. I remember a lot of physical fights in high school.

Those are some of my dramatic fear stories. I have more usual fear stories too. I had serious night terrors that I overcame substantially by making myself walk into scary night spaces

and look around. I couldn't handle the terror comic books that were common then and my father helped me out enormously by telling me I didn't have to look at them. So simple and powerful a healing... I remember being an outsider in a lot of social settings. I remember the fear that served me so well by directing me to keep my transgender experience hidden... I remember losing two career lines for standing up for principles I believed in... I remember two divorces and the loss of good friends... I remember being personally seriously threatened a couple of times while I was participating in civil rights marches or rallies... I remember having my phone tapped by the FBI and their attempt to intimidate me by interrogating my mother-in-law in front of her high school class. I remember needing to be cautious and hyper alert as I walked in certain areas of scrub and woods in Leon County and in my neighborhood in Chicago. I remember suddenly being very poor... I remember not being able to buy any food for several days until the next pay period, when financial security meant having food in the pantry, when financial disaster was needing to buy a car battery. I remember stepping over the body of a fellow private when our Sargent kicked him in the side of the knee and broke his leg and nothing was done about it. I remember that Sargent telling me he would kill me if we were ever deployed together. I remember that Sargent talking openly about fragging (killing) officers who didn't care about protecting their enlisted.

I remember my son Daniel being on the edge of the death for a week with 24 hour personal nursing care as he tried to recover in an oxygen tent. I remember being afraid of my older brother who did me some serious harm and threatened me in a way that led to thirty or so years of a repeated night mare. I remember carrying a pistol because of fear of bears on some wilderness hikes. I remember coming very close to sliding over a cliff to my certain death on a wilderness hike.

I also remember Anna Gilcher's sermon that emphasized a fear story about bears in the campground while she was in a tent. And I remember my sermon that, in part, responded to her sermon and led to the congregation singing the terrific funny folk song, Waltzing with Bears.

What are your fear stories? (Pause) Take a moment to share one story with a neighbor...

I have plenty of fear stories even though most of them happened when I was young and strong, prepared and experienced in direct fighting, well-armed and a marksman, never sought out recreation like bungee jumping to get a fear rush of adrenalin, and paid a lot of attention to standard safety precautions. I had the advantages of being white, male, education, with good middle-class parents. I've risked into situations with some danger but I never felt I needed to prove my courage or defend a macho self-image. My basic posture has been that danger is often real, fear is commonly appropriate and very helpful, and we all die anyhow.

I considered talking about fear and the 9/11 attacks. I remember my own fear on that day, mostly for two new interns who were out on the Hill somewhere. With almost nine years of reflection I'm thinking about how spoiled we are as a nation, including me. I want to feel invulnerable despite the fact that we are using force against others. I much prefer to let the police and the military do all the worrying and take most of the risks in dangerous situations.

I also considered talking about fear management, safety

precautions, and other practicalities or psychological processes, but that is not where this sermon is headed. Once again, the topic is salvation.

Two elements of our lectionary scripture are relevant.

In the story of Naaman and Elisha, a story aimed at exalting the power of the God of Israel over the gods of other nations, and also aimed at showing that prophets are more courageous and more important than kings, there is a hinge point that is easy to overlook. A young girl had recently been captured as a slave when Naaman's army had raided through Israel. It doesn't get much more vulnerable than that. She didn't have any of the human scale protections I've enjoyed. She nonetheless spoke up to tell about the great power of Elisha. There was risk in that. It was somehow the next right step for her...

In the story of Jesus sending out the seventy-two several things caught my eye. It is unlikely to be a historical happening since it was clearly written by an author who praised Tyre and Sidon in Syria, the strong cities of the Selucid Kings, Gentile cities with strong connections to the Roman Empire, and highly critical of Bethsaida and Caepernaum where Jesus had experienced a lot of success and found followers. The main point about seventy-two is that it is not the famous twelve disciples but six times as many. It is not hard to read a Gentile perspective here. Furthermore, the description of going barefooted without purse or pack is parallel to the common practice of Cynic prophets who walked the land for a Roman philosophy. Still, the point of the story is vulnerability and trusting in spiritual power rather than human resources and preparation. That is still gospel

news.

Let's now consider the commonality of the three messages in the story of the seventy-two.

Say, "Peace to this House."

Say, "The Empire of God has come upon you."

Say, "The Empire of Heaven has come and if you don't join in you will suffer greatly on Judgment Day."

And I also call attention to a verse from the Galatians lectionary scripture: "...as opportunity offers, let us work for the good of all, especially members of the household of faith."

Salvation is a here-and-now reality, a here-and-now experience. Peace is possible, is present, even in the midst of oppression, even before everything has been made right. We do not need any additional preparation before getting started with noticing and engaging the opportunities to work for the good of all. We don't need Powdermilk Biscuits to start doing what needs to be done. Discernment is good. Preparation is good. Reflection is good. Safety consciousness is good. Estimating efficiency and effectiveness is good. Gathering resources is good. Enhancing cooperation and planning is good. Learning from experience is good.

Getting started is critical. Getting started over and over again is critical. Getting started before seeing the outcome of your caring and investments is critical. And, the point of this sermon, accepting risks is critical.

Accepting risks means facing forward into dangers: the dangers we know and the ones that surprise us, the ones we evaluate correctly and the ones we exaggerate or try to ignore. When danger strikes, salvation includes taking the hurts in stride as you walk your path within the Christian Way. You haven't been betrayed by God for following your holy callings. Jesus was not betrayed by God when he chose the path to the cross. Natural catastrophes, oppression, alienation, hate, bad habits, revenge, and more are part of the world we walk in whether we take up salvation by following the Christian Way or not. We don't get a special deal with God because we take risks, because we suffer as a result of our choices, or just suffer as part of the human condition.

We live and die as human creatures. We can choose to follow the lures of God as we experience them. We can choose to orient our choices to the narrative of Jesus, can share and accept support and accountability within this Christian community. We can do the good Christian things to do and still not get a special deal from God.

Fortunately, the general deal from God is a good deal for those with eyes to see. It includes the possibility of salvation, salvation whatever your circumstances, salvation whether you suffer for your choices or not. It includes health whatever your physiological circumstances. It includes guidance whatever your degree of psychological and spiritual maturity. It includes the experience of living meaningfully,

contributing substantially, whatever your level of understanding and appreciation, whatever your skill or insight.

Fear is not a bad thing in and of itself. Fear is a terrible thing if you let it block you from taking the next step on your path to salvation. It doesn't help to protest against fear, to resent fear, to expect to live without fear. Be glad for the warnings of fears and then evaluate the fears if you have the time. The point is not to get distracted from the guidance to salvation. When you pay your tuition in life's hard knocks be sure to take the lesson and then keep on living.

We help people out in this community when insight or resources or caring are wanted, but our reservoir of insight is finite, our common resources small against the needs of the world and small even against the needs of our members, and our caring is limited by all our human frailties and shortcomings. A lot of days it seems to me that it is all I can do just to take care of myself and my family. You can trust us to be a caring community with many faults and shortcomings. You can trust God that following the lures of love and caring and hope and trust and honesty, and generosity, and humility, and courage, and more, leads to salvation.

Remembering your awe and wonder at the magnificence or creation and retaining thankfulness for the gift of your life can help. Remembering the narrative of Jesus and living into the guidance it offers can help. Experiencing the joy of vitality and acceptance as you find companionship on the Christian Way can help. None of this matters if you get stuck in fear. If you are stuck in fear let God matter to you more,

let the love of your companions matter more, let the possibilities of your claiming of your callings matter more. It wont make you safe, but it will let you find peace and joy in the midst of all your unreadiness, in the midst of all that is wrong, in the midst of all that is dangerous. You can aim at safety consciousness, you can aim at living wisely, you can aim at efficiency and effectiveness, you can aim at friendship. Just take the risks that are yours to take and accept the outcomes of following your chosen path.

I invite you to dance with your fears when immediate action is not needed. Tell them to yourself with alternative endings. Stick a pin in the ones that are overblown. Add a safety precaution if that is warranted. Write it down in your journal. Send it into a herd of pigs. Walk on water. Find your coin. Accept that you are likely to really hurt sometimes. Be thankful that your fears remind you of some things that really matter to you.

I want to sing "Dancing with Bears" again. I want to be all the characters in the song: Uncle Walter, his family and friends, and the raggedy bears too. I don't have that pistol anymore.