

Rewriting Our Fear Stories

March 18, 2018 Mark 4:35 – 5:8 Roger Barkley
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Do you know what is the most frequently repeated command in the Bible?

“Fear not.”

Every time our faith is about to be expanded, every time we are being led forward, God tells us, angels tells us, or Jesus tell us, “Fear not”.

It turns out that the opposite of faith isn't doubt, it is fear.

Why?

Because fear paralyzes us, fear makes us self-focused, and fear leads to foolish decisions.

Back when I was a sales manager for the Del Monte Corporation, we were offered a team building exercise called the Ropes Course.

You've heard of these exercises where participants are challenged to do all sorts of climbing, walking along rope bridges, and trapezing off telephone poles ... but at the time they were not as well-known and popular as today.

The company was given two free passes to a Saturday course up near Arrowhead Lake, and my boss, bless her heart, suggested that Amy and I go to see if it would be a worthwhile investment for our salesforce.

You need to understand that I have a paralyzing, inborn fear of heights, and my boss knew it.

She knew, for example, that I had been incapable of taking a champagne brunch hot air balloon ride that I had been given for my birthday because just the thought of riding in a balloon literally made me break out in sweat.

By the way, one of the things I've learned from Kerstynn's time in the South is that this phrase, "bless her heart", can be a valuable part of our language.

Used properly, you can pretty much say anything about anybody, as long as you finish by saying, "Bless her heart".

For example, "Did you see Mary Jo at the diner this morning? Let's just say, that woman sure loves her grits. Bless her heart."

Or, in this case, "My boss was mean and sadistic, bless her heart."

Of course, during the Ropes Course everyone is safely harnessed, but your gut fails to get the message, and so the terror is almost as real as if you were climbing untethered.

I got through the first couple of low rope exercises, but totally humiliated myself in front of everyone, including my new wife, by physically freezing while climbing up a 20' pole from which we were supposed to walk out and along a swaying rope bridge.

I'd never had such an experience.

I physically froze. I could not move.

Now part of the program was that a coach would come alongside you and talk you through your fears so that you could finish.

I somehow got through that early exercise, but it took so much time that even the coaches didn't encourage me to do the following ones.

So, I sat in shame while Amy climbed higher and higher, and swung out on ropes and all sorts of stuff.

The final exercise was so intimidating that several others sat with me as we watched people climb a ladder leaning on a telephone pole, climb up the pole and

then step onto a little round pad, turn around 180 degrees, and then jump about ten feet to a trapeze that swung and then lowered them to the ground.

Amy did it while I watched in total humiliation, not sure how I would face her on our drive home.

After the last person had gone, and the coaches were getting ready to give their final pep talk and head home, I stood up and said I wanted to try.

“No, really, you don’t have to,” one of the interjected.

Hardly encouraging, but she probably wanted to get home in time for dinner or something.

But I put on my helmet, quivered my way up the ladder, and about halfway up the telephone pole realized what a terrible idea this was.

The coaches encouraged me and I kept going.

Trying to stand on top of the 50’ pole turned out to be the hardest part of all.

As I inched around to face the trapeze, I looked over the tops of trees and forced myself not to look down.

I was so pumped with adrenaline that when it came time to jump to the trapeze, I scared the coaches by nearly over-jumping right through the trapeze so that the safety ropes almost tangled.

That moment of facing my overpowering fear changed my life.

I was empowered because I could overcome a huge fear.

Today, I still don’t like heights.

But, I now can climb ladders ... I’ve changed those lights up there in the sanctuary ceiling, I’ve been up and down the roof dozens of times.

No way I could have in the past.

But most important, I don't feel impotent in the face of any fear.

Today's scripture finds the disciples in a state of extreme fear as their little boat seems headed for the bottom of the Sea of Galilee.

For reasons they do not yet understand, Jesus had them launch from shore at night and head for the other side – the other side being the foreign, unfamiliar, unclean, and threatening Gentile world of the Gerasenes.

Although it was only eight miles from their dock in Capernaum, the disciples probably had never been to the other side, but they'd heard many disparaging stories about those people.

I got to sail in the Sea of Galilee aboard a replica of a 1st Century fishing boat, and I've got to tell you that it was pretty small and rickety, and would really get thrashed in stormy waters.

The disciples knew these waters well, and so they understood that violent storms can appear out of nowhere – which this one did.

It was so strong that even the experienced sailors were terrified.

Jesus seemed to be sleeping – had he not noticed their peril?

Did he not care?

Was he powerless to help?

I would guess that if we were to press the gospel writer Mark for his definition of “faith”, he would say that it means to travel with Jesus, even though you do not understand exactly who he is or where he is leading you.

Simply being with Jesus is your safety.

Jesus says get into the boat and head to a foreboding place at night – you get in the boat and go because Jesus will be with you.

Jesus does eventually calm the waters ... but as it turns out, not just to give the disciples a peaceful ride.

Rather, he calms the waters so they can land on the opposite shore where they will immediately confront a demon possessed man, another fear to be faced while traveling with Jesus.

Jesus will say that it's the Father's will to give you what he calls a "Kingdom life".

Luke 12:32 *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom."*

But he doesn't say a "coddled life", avoiding all risk.

Remember, he was leading the disciples head-long into their deepest fears by taking them to face a demoniac for a divine purpose that they did not yet grasp.

I was driving down Harbor Blvd. in Stanton about forty years ago, listening as I often did to self-improvement tapes.

The one that was playing was by psychologist Susan Jeffers who was talking about how the way we deal with fears either empowers *us*, or empowers *our fears*.

It was such a life-changing revelation for me that I can still remember the intersection where I was when I heard her say, "Feel the fear, but do it anyway."

Often, we don't pursue our dreams because our inner saboteur paralyzes us with fearful stories.

Jeffers says that even if you don't reach your ultimate goal, "pushing through fear is less frightening than living with the underlying fear that comes from a feeling of helplessness."

Avoiding the things I fear is like feeding them and so the stronger and more looming I make them become.

Mandy Hale reminds us, “Growth is painful. Change is painful. But nothing is as painful as staying stuck somewhere you don’t belong.”

On the other hand, when we confront what haunts us, they often turn out to just be stories we’ve told, retold and inflated to ourselves.

This is an aspect of fear that is uniquely human.

We tell stories to one another, and we tell stories to ourselves.

Stories not only entertain us, they help us make sense of our world and our lives.

But when we dwell on the same story, telling it to ourselves over and over, our stories define who we see ourselves to be.

That could be a life-enhancing vision, but often that is a limiting fear.

So, what if we could see our fears as acts of the imagination, as stories we tell ourselves?

As with all stories, your fears have an author, a main character and an audience ... but in the case of our fear stories, we, ourselves, are the author, the main character and the audience.

And like all good stories, our fears have a plot line, vivid imagery and suspense to keep us hooked-in: What will happen next, and then, and then?

But our fear stories always lead us to very bad endings, and we have an especially strong emotional bond to the main character because they’re us!

So, consider for a moment some fear story you tell yourself ... some story that hooks you in to telling and retelling it, and that leads to your doom, your humiliation or your rejection.

Often the doom we foresee is rooted in our childhood.

Maybe you were consistently the last to be chosen for a team, overlooked for the party invitations, left alone in the corner of the playground.

So, when you think of taking a risk or an unpopular position, you freeze as you tell yourself a well-worn story that concludes with your character rejected and alone once again.

Or maybe, your inherited fear of financial scarcity leads you to be tightfisted, or maybe even unwilling to make a financial plan.

Rather than risk, we play it safe, we withdraw, or we just stew and worry – but one way or another, our fear stories paralyze us.

That is because whereas animals have the fight or flight reflex, our fear stories bring us one additional response, what we might call a freeze reflex.

In 1820, after a 2-1/2-year voyage from New England, the U.S. ship *Essex* was whaling in the South Pacific about 3,000 miles west of South America when it was rammed twice by a giant sperm whale that quickly sent the ship to the bottom of the sea.

The twenty crew members climbed onto their small whale boats and spent the next day gathering floating debris that they hoped would provide for their survival.

In those days, there was no long-distance communication.

No one knew they were in trouble.

No rescue party would ever come.

So they faced a critical decision: which way to head for safety.

The men were about as far from land as anyone on the face of the earth can be as they chose between three possible courses of action, each carrying some degree of risk.

Their first option was to sail southwest to the Marquesas Islands, over a thousand miles away but because of prevailing winds entirely doable.

Their fear, however, was that they'd heard rumors of cannibals living there.

Would they make it to safety, only to find themselves roasted for the natives' dinner?

The second option was to head north to Hawaii, but they feared violent storms might block their way.

Their third option was to turn around and hope to catch some winds that would propel them to familiar shores of South America, but this was the longest journey and a quick inventory showed them that they did not have the supplies to make it that far.

After some debate the decision was made to turn back and sail toward South America.

You see, how we choose to read our own fear stories determines our course of action.

In this case, the lurid imagery of cannibals slaughtering and eating them paralyzed the sailors from making the only logical choice.

Driven by a fear of something that *might* be, they chose the most unlikely route for success, sailing toward South America, even though they knew they didn't have sufficient supplies.

After two months at sea, the men predictably did run out of food and water, and they were still hundreds of miles from land.

In the coming weeks, over half the crew died, and – ironically – those who did survive resorted to cannibalism of each other.

So, our fears are a kind of unintentional story telling ... and which stories we choose to tell ourselves and believe can be a matter of life and death – or at the very least a life of joy and meaning, or smallness and meanness.

The good news about this understanding is that you can intercept your self-story, see what it's about, and decide whether it is productive to keep telling yourself.

Just as with the disciples in their rickety boat, wherever you are heading, know that God is with you and already there waiting for you.

That doesn't mean that some of your fears won't come true but knowing that Jesus is near allows you to step back from your dramatic stories of doom.

Knowing Jesus is close, you can affirm, "There's nothing in my life today that God and I cannot handle together."

Knowing that Jesus is near allows you to step into the more cool and logical self that can envision options, construct solutions, weigh risks, focus on success and thereby feel your fears and do it anyway.

So, what would you do, dare, attempt, if you knew you couldn't fail?

When we grasp the meaning of Jesus' promise that it is God's good pleasure to give us an abundant, blessed life – a Kingdom life – we are suddenly freed to risk, to seek just solutions, and to care for others.

What an astoundingly different message that is than the one we hear in our culture and from our politicians.

Rather than Jesus' message to not be afraid, but to love and serve, the new formula for winning elections and getting strong media rating is to relentlessly warn about the things and people we should fear.

This atmosphere of fear is contagious, and it limits our vision, paralyzes our actions, and drives us to self-preservation rather than to openness, and the service Jesus calls us to.

Yes, the disciples went on to experience multiple setbacks and disappointments.

Yet they carried on, trusting that their future and self-worth were neither secured by their success nor eroded by even devastating setbacks, but rather were made sure by God's good pleasure and promise alone.