

***“Yes, fear is often our first reaction...
and it doesn’t have to be our last.”***

Third Sermon in the Advent Series: “Yes, And...Being Open + Making Space”

*Yes, you can be open to different ideas...
and you can create space for them within what you already know.*

Luke 2:8-20 (NRSV)

What is your greatest fear?
Public speaking? Heights?
Spiders? Not passing an exam
or not graduating on time? Fear
of how an illness is changing
your life or family? Fear of the
power of grief and wondering
when that grief will ever loosen
its grip on you? Fear of whether
you will be able to have the
family you desire, the job you
seek, a healthy relationship?
Fear of finances of the stock
market crashing? Maybe you
just made a big decision and
you worry, “*will I regret this
some day?*”

Fear is normal. We all live with
fear, some more than others.
Even the shepherds were
afraid...terrified, in fact! But
before I talk about the
shepherds, want to talk about
tigers and sailors first. But I’ll
get back to the shepherds, I
promise.

So first – tigers. For many
years these big beautiful
creatures have puzzled
researchers. It seems that when

tigers hunt they have a
remarkable capacity for causing
their prey to paralyze with fear,
a capacity greater than any of
the other big cats. As the tiger
charges toward its prey it lets
out a spine-chilling roar. Now
you’d think this would be
enough to cause the prey to turn
and run for its life, but instead
it often freezes and soon
becomes tiger food.

At the turn of this century,
scientists at the Fauna
Communication Research
Institute in North Carolina
discovered why you’re likely to
freeze rather than run when a
tiger charges. It’s because when
the tiger roars it lets out sound
waves that are audible – the
ones that sound terrifying – *and*
it also lets out sound at a
frequency so low you can’t hear
it, but you can *feel* it in your
bones.

And so, as the tiger emerges
from the undergrowth...the
flashing of its colors, the sound
of its roar, and the impact of the

unheard but felt sound waves combine to provide an all-out assault on your senses: sight, sound, and feeling are all engaged. The effect is that you are momentarily paralyzed. So even though there may be time to avoid the tiger, you are tricked into standing still long enough for the tiger to leap on you.”¹

Now my title is, “Yes, fear is often our first reaction...and it doesn’t have to be our last,” however in this case, unfortunately, fear was the last emotion for these prey. But we are not animals, we are humans! So we should be above such paralyzing fear, right? Well...our fears may not paralyze us physically, but they can paralyze our reasoning and rationale. They can propel us into our imaginations – creating all kinds of terrifying scenarios for our future.

“One day in 1819, 3,000 miles off the coast of Chile, in one of the most remote regions of the Pacific Ocean, 20 American sailors watched their ship flood with seawater. They'd been struck by a whale, which had ripped a catastrophic hole in the

ship's hull. As their ship began to sink beneath the swells, the men huddled together in three small whaleboats. These men were 10,000 miles from home, more than 1,000 miles from the nearest scrap of land. In their small boats, they carried only rudimentary navigational equipment and limited supplies of food and water. These were the men of the whaleship Essex, whose story would later inspire parts of *Moby Dick*.”²

“Even in today's world, their situation would be really dire, but think about how much worse it would have been then. No one on land had any idea that anything had gone wrong. No search party was coming to look for these men.”

As they sought to make a plan, their imaginations started to generate fears as they drifted in the middle of the Pacific. The men knew that the nearest islands they could reach were the Marquesas Islands, 1,200 miles away. But they'd heard some frightening rumors...these islands were populated by cannibals. So the men pictured coming ashore

¹ Scott Higgins, “The Tiger’s Roar,” *Stories for Preaching*, accessed on 16 Dec. 2018 at <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/fear/>.

² Karen Thompson Walker, “What Fear Can Teach Us,” *TedTalksGlobal2012* (June 2012), accessed on 16 Dec. 2018 at https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_thompson_walker_what_fear_can_teach_us/transcript#t-671544.

only to be murdered and eaten for dinner. Another possible destination was Hawaii, but given the season, the captain was afraid they'd be struck by severe storms. Now the last option was the longest, and the most difficult: to sail 1,500 miles due south in hopes of reaching a certain band of winds that could eventually push them toward the coast of South America. But they knew that the sheer length of this journey would stretch their supplies of food and water.³

So their options, in their minds, were: To be eaten by cannibals, to be battered by storms and drown to death, or to starve to death before reaching land. After much deliberation, the men finally made a decision. Terrified of cannibals, they decided to forgo the closest islands and instead embark on the longer and much more difficult route to South America. After more than two months at sea, the men ran out of food as they knew they might, and they were still quite far from land. When the last of the survivors were finally picked up by two passing ships, less than half of the men were left alive, and some of them had

resorted to the very thing they were most afraid of – cannibalism.⁴

Why did these men dread the rumored possibility of cannibals on islands *they* could reach safely MORE THAN the definite likelihood of starvation trying to get to an island they'd never reach?

You've probably heard of this before...but some say that FEAR stands for “false evidence appearing real.” It can appear so real, in fact, that we begin to believe that the worst version of what could happen is what, in fact, *will* happen.

In her Ted Talk, writer Karen Thompson Walker says, “the men of the Essex leaned into their imaginations more than their rationale. They dreamed up a variety of horrifying scenarios. The problem was that they listened to the wrong story. Of all the narratives their fears wrote, they responded only to the most lurid, the most vivid, the one that was easiest for their imaginations to picture: cannibals.”⁵ And they ran from it.

Perhaps if they'd been able to read their fears more like a

³ Walker, *ibid.*
⁴ Walker, *ibid.*

⁵ Walker, *ibid.*

scientist, with more coolness of judgment, they would have listened instead to the less violent but the more likely tale, the story of starvation, and headed for Tahiti. We all do this, right? We worry more about plane crashes, say, than the gradual build up of plaque in our arteries⁶...even though the latter is what is more likely to actually kill us. But because the image of the plane crash is so vivid...and we can imagine it so well...it captures our attention...and our fear.

What does any of this have to do with Luke 2?

Well, on the most basic level, the tiger's prey and the sailors' plight remind us that fear is a part of all of our lives AND it holds very real consequences when it grips us. Maybe our fears don't physically kill us, but they can stunt our spiritual growth and even cut us off from others emotionally. Fears can keep us from thriving and fulfilling our potential...they can keep us from enjoying *today*, even. Fear is part of all of our lives.

It is even present in the story of the birth of our Lord and Savior. Even Jesus doesn't escape fear. In fact, his whole

birth story is laced with the angelic pronouncement: "*Do not be afraid! Fear Not!*" Whether the angel is talking to Mary, to Joseph, or to the Shepherds, it's almost as if we are supposed to be comforted because the message is coming from an angel, but really – their presence must have been frightening – or at least awe-inspiring – because they always have to cushion their entrance with "Fear Not!" (I feel sorry for Jesus...he probably had to grow up hearing how afraid everyone was of his birth!)

We know they felt fear because the text says "*they were terrified,*" (v9). In terms of what kind of fear this was, the shepherds are used to fighting off all kinds of prey at night – they were protecting their sheep after all. Their fear was probably not the panic kind of fear...they had seen everything and were used to being brave on behalf of their sheep.

I wonder if their fear was more about how this would change their life more than it was about any physical threat to their life? What would it mean for them to go from excluded to included? You see, the shepherds were not used to receiving angelic messages that are divinely

⁶ Walker, *ibid.*

inspired. They were shunned to the sides of society, never included in its most important message. They were excluded from the Temple because of purity laws – they were told...you are *not* the ones to be in the presence of the divine. So again – I wonder if their fear was about what this message would mean for their life? How it would change their life?

Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti said, “*One is never afraid of the unknown; one is afraid of the known coming to an end.*”⁷

What would happen to the shepherds...the life that they *knew*...IF they listened to the angel?

We all know the story. The shepherds head to Bethlehem to see the baby. What I love about their decision is this: They don't let fear drive their decision. Rather, it's rooted in curiosity and companionship. Much like when Mary received a visit from Gabriel and when Joseph had his dream, I doubt that the shepherds' fear just went away once the angels reassured them and then left. I think their fear is partially what led them to Bethlehem. They

didn't know what to expect. They didn't even know if this message was true. But they were willing to take a chance. To take a risk.

Even in their fear – they are curious. They wonder what this message is all about. And – they go together. They say, “*Let's go see...*” – which is a statement of both wonder and community. It's plural and it's exploratory. The shepherds are companions on the journey. They don't just send one shepherd ahead to go check it out. They all go together.

These two things – curiosity and companionship – can temper our fears. They don't make our fears go away – but they can help us step out in faith and imagine (with hope) a new possibility, instead of being paralyzed in fear...falling prey to the worst thing we can imagine. Isn't it true that we often need others to pull us up and out of fear – to lift our eyes to see a different reality?

Fear is not to be feared, and yet in our society you wouldn't know that. We're encouraged to think of fear as a weakness or danger. We say,

⁷ Accessed on 16 Dec. 2018 at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/278125-one-is-never-afraid-of-the-unknown-one-is-afraid>.

"Don't worry." "Don't panic." Fear is something we conquer. It's something we fight. It's something we overcome. But, author Karen Thompson Walker challenges us, "*what if we looked at fear in a fresh way?*"⁸

What if instead of calling them "fears," we called our fears, "stories"? Because that's really what fear is, if you think about it. It's a kind of unintentional storytelling that we are all born knowing how to do.⁹ (Think about kids and the monsters under the bed? We have the imaginatory capacity to bring fears to life even as kids!)

Walker says fears and storytelling have the same components. They have the same architecture. Like all stories, fears have characters. In our fears, the characters are us. Fears also have plots. They have beginnings and middles and ends. You board the plane. The plane takes off. The engine fails.

Our fears also tend to contain imagery that can be every bit as vivid as what you might find in the pages of a novel. Fears also have suspense. Just like all great stories, our fears focus

our attention on a question that is as important in life as it is in literature: What will happen next? In other words, our fears make us think about the future. (And humans, by the way, are the only creatures capable of thinking about the future in this way, of projecting ourselves forward in time, and this mental time travel is just one more thing that fears have in common with storytelling).¹⁰

Here's where she's going with all this: IF we think of our fears as more than just fears but as *stories*, we can think of ourselves as not just the authors of those stories, but as importantly, the *readers* of our fears. And how we choose to read and how we make meaning from our fears can have a profound effect on our lives.¹¹

If we read then and make meaning from them, we can learn lessons from our fears far before they ever become a reality. And when we make meaning from them, we're far less afraid. Why? Because they become KNOWN to us. They are no longer unknown. Whether we like what the fear is telling us or not, at least they present a story we can become

⁸ Walker, *ibid.*

⁹ Walker, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Walker, *ibid.*

¹¹ Walker, *ibid.*

familiar with, and therefore less afraid of.

The shepherds are asked by the angels to jump into a story they thought they had nothing to do with. Since when did their lives relate to anything God was doing in the world? They weren't even allowed in the Temple, in God's house! When the angels left they could have just said, "*Whoa, that was weird. Did you see that? Did you see what I saw? Did you hear what I heard? We must really be sleep deprived. Whatever – it was probably just a dream.*" The shepherds could have just gone about their business and trusted what they knew and "thought" to be true. They could have NOT gone to Bethlehem still believing the myth that nothing special happens to them and they are not crucial in God's story. But they took a risk and went. They followed the voice of God, not letting their fears get the best of them, and in taking that risk, they were changed...and so was the world.

Fear is a natural emotion. It's hard-wired into us. We will all feel it at some time. The question is – will we let fear freeze us? Will we let fear close off our curiosity? Will we let fear close us off to other

people?

Or will we allow our fear to fuel us toward faith? An even deeper faith? A faith that calls us to actually walk the journey that so many people have walked before us --- a journey of walking **in** fear, not avoiding it --- a journey of walking in fear, into the unknown, with others --- toward Emmanuel – God with us.

Scripture tells us that after seeing the baby Jesus and realizing that this special message to the shepherds from God was indeed true – that they were overcome with joy – "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them,*" (v20). The shepherds show us how to hold FEAR and JOY together.

This is why one of my favorite carols is *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. I love the line, "*The **Hopes and Fears** of all the Years are Met in the Thee* (in God) *Tonight.*" Substitute your own words there: Hopes and Fears. Joys and Grievs. Laughs and Tears. Wonders and Worries. Whatever you are feeling – whatever mix of emotions – all of those are met within the Christchild...within Godself. You are not weird for

not feeling only joy this season. Or for not being able to shake a grief. You are human. And you may even be just a bit more divine whenever you allow yourself to experience more than one emotion at once. (Remember the *hopes* AND *fears* were met in God, in the Christ-child...not kept out of Godself...but intertwined within Godself.)

What would happen if you stopped telling yourself the singular narrative that you are “afraid.” Or you are “grieving.” Or you are “angry.” Maybe you are afraid, and you are open to learning something new. Maybe you are grieving and you have many things in your life for which you are grateful. Maybe you are angry and you are able to still express kindness. Both/and. “Yes, And...”

You see, our Advent “Yes, And...” theme of BEING OPEN + MAKING SPACE does not mean that we have to eliminate one thing to experience another. Perhaps more realistic than eliminating our fears or concerns about the future is the possibility of just making space within our fears and worries for moments of joy to break in. Isn’t that what the incarnation is all about? Jesus

came so that we could stop telling ourselves this story: *“Because this is happening to me, I am afraid, and my life is over or my future is wrecked, or nothing will ever change...”*

And instead tell ourselves THIS story: *“Because this is happening to me, I am afraid. And – my life is more than this one experience, this one relationship, this one job, this one circumstance, this one illness, this one challenge. My future is full of possibilities, some potentially impacted by this fear, and others not. I may be afraid, yes, and my fear will not control me. In the midst of my fear – like the shepherds – I can journey, I can be curious about what’s next, I can talk to others about what’s happening, I can do things that are totally unrelated to my fear, and I can experience joy and shout it from the rooftops...I can meet God, in fact even in my fear.”*

Don’t just take it from the shepherds. Many times in the Bible, God-followers are exhorted to *“Fear Not! Be not be afraid.”* ...And fear is never the **entirety** of their story **or** the **end** of it, is it? If that is true for them, what makes you think it won’t be true for you as well?

Amen.