

“Not Fearing. By Fearing.”

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Fifth in a series on Psalm 23

Exodus 14 and Psalm 23

June 7, 2020

You know we're looking at Psalm 23, the most famous psalm, about the Lord who is our Shepherd. I've been walking us through it step-by-step, line by line. I'm trying to listen for what God is saying to us, especially in this time. I hope you're listening too. What is God saying to you?

Last time, we got into the dark valley.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil.
For You — God, our Shepherd — You are with me.*

It's the centre of the Psalm, and it's the place of danger, extreme perils, malicious, malignant evil, deathly. Whatever it is for you, it's the place, the situation, the circumstance where you are going to be afraid. But the Psalm says, "I will not fear!"

This Valley is not the sort of place you want to be for long. We will continue through the Psalm next week. But I need to pause here.

Because I'm afraid.

And because I need to be afraid. But afraid rightly.

II

Here is another Bible piece that's probably familiar to you too. It starts with Israel, God's People, fearful. It ends with them fearful. But notice how different the fears are.

Please read Exodus 14:10-14,19-31 If you're reading this online,
you can see this Scripture selection [by clicking here](#).

It starts with the Israelites "in great fear." Of course they are. For generation after generation they've been enslaved by the Egyptian superpower. Now they are out! But out in the middle of nowhere, completely unarmed and ill-prepared, and the best army in the world is about to crash onto them to finish its genocide.

They cry out to the Lord.

"Don't be afraid," says Moses. Watch!

You know what they saw.

But at the end, they are fearful again. But it's different.

“Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD.”

III

Feel the fear.

She is in one of those “high risk” health categories. She lives alone. She’s afraid to leave. Afraid to go shopping. Afraid to run errands. Afraid to accept deliveries. Afraid to do anything that would bring her in contact with other people and, potentially, the virus that could kill her. Fear has hold of her. She wants to overcome it, but it’s hard.

Feel the fear?

I talk with someone who has had to shutter his business because it can’t operate safely these days. He agonizes. Will there will be anything left to reopen? What about those who work for him?

Feel the fear?

What about the bigger thing? Climate change and chaos, it’s still happening. I know these days we’re pouring less CO2 into our atmosphere, with so much shut down. But it’s like for 200, 300 years we’ve been adding brick upon brick upon brick to a pile that’s now crushing down on us. This year the brick is going to be a bit smaller. But there’s still the pile.¹

Feel the fear?

These days, a lot of fear. South of the border and up here. Fear that’s always been heavy upon so many Black, Indigenous and other People of Colour. There’s nothing new to what’s happening. Just now some of it’s getting caught on video, finally. The brutality of systemic racism is impossible to deny or cover-up anymore, though some still try and thereby prove their own foolishness. Those of us who are white, if we can’t say “Black Lives Matter,” then we best be quiet and listen more. But even if we can, listen.

The fear was captured in my heart by a friend’s story. She and her husband were expecting. Twins! During the ultrasound, they got the news. Boys! The father’s face fell into fear. They’re preschoolers now, energetic and beautiful. By God’s grace they will grow into compassionate, wise and powerful Black men. But their dad already knows what they will face as boys, then youth, then men. He knows in his body about being a Black man, in Canada.

Feel the fear?

¹ I heard Kathryn Hayhoe use this analogy during a talk she gave, “Christians and Climate Change,” delivered online for the *Festival of Homiletics* (May 18, 2020).

IV

But the Bible says, “Fear not!”

God’s word to Abraham when he has no future: “Fear not!” To Joshua on the eve of battle: “Fear not!” To Mary, our Lord’s mother: “Fear not!” And Joseph his father: “Fear not!” To a bereaved parent, who thought Jesus was too late: “Fear not!” To Israelites with their backs against the sea: “Fear not!” To disciples facing an empty tomb: “Fear not!”²

But. . . .

I know there are fears that are groundless, and destructive and self-destructive. Fears out of control, swarming and swirling around you.

But there is sensible fear. Forces, powers, tyrants, viruses, diseases, disasters, catastrophes, people, systems, institutions, death. There are things it makes sense to be afraid of.

Fear not? I wish I could. But I’m afraid those words alone cannot free me from those fears. Not unless I fear the One behind the “Fear Not!”

V

Fear God.

This “fear of God” idea, it’s uncomfortable for many of us. It’s a big idea in the Bible, though. Maybe we can relearn it, for these fearful times.³

The word “fear” confuses us. We know fear. Fearing God, though, is very different from all other fears. It’s holy fear.

Holy fear is not being terrified of God.

Holy fear does not make you want to get away from God. You want to get closer.

Holy fear comes when you know God loves you, God wants to give you salvation in every way, God wants to forgive you and bless you, and God does it all the time.

You have this holy fear when you really understand how tiny you are, vulnerable, desperate, powerless, fragile . . . then realize who God is, that God holds you and has you.

Pope Francis says, *“This is fear of the Lord: abandonment in the goodness of our Father*

² Genesis 15.1; Joshua 8.1; Luke 1.30; Matthew 1.20; Luke 8.50; Exodus 20.13; Matthew 28.5. In some instances “Fear not!” is spoken by a messenger of God (such as Moses, or an angel), but it is always a word from God.

³ From a talk by Ellen F. Davis, “Ungodly Facts, Real Power, and Holy Fear: Telling the Plain Truth,” delivered online for the *Festival of Homiletics* (May 19, 2020).

*who loves us so much.*⁴

You were on one side of the sea, terrified of Pharaoh's armies. Now you're on the other side. You've seen what God does, particularly for the poor, oppressed, endangered, those whose lives, they say, don't matter. You are filled with awe, reverence, gratitude and trembling wonder. You fear God who is so good. Delightful fear.⁵

VI

James Fordyce said:

*Henceforth the majesty of God revere;
Fear Him, and you have nothing else to fear.*⁶

A bit less poetically:

*I do not fear what's in front of me,
because of Who's behind me.*

It's not that the things in front of you are any less real, or any less frightening.

It's that, whatever they might do to you, you know Who has you.

So this holy, delightful fear of God, it does not make you paralyzed in panic. The opposite. Knowing the fearful wonder of God gives you power to stand in the face of what frightens you.

You can live through turmoil and uncertainty. You can face loss. Still with hope. Still with courage. Because you know Whom you fear.

You can stand against what is wrong, and do what is right. You can go face to face with those forces that want to keep things as they are. As they are, even though those ways are self-destructive: for our planet, for our society, for our humanity, and for individuals. It will cost you. But you can stand against them, because no matter how scary they are, you know Whom you fear.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For You, Whom I fear, are with me.

⁴ From Pope Francis' General Audience (June 11, 2014). Available online at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140611_udi_enza-generale.html.

⁵ In her talk Ellen Davis said, "*This is one of the pivotal moments in the whole arc of Scripture. Every hope that they biblical writers hold out all through the rest of Torah, prophets, on through the New Testament, ever imperishable hope stems from this moment, when Israel ceases to be dominated by natural fear, in this case fear of the empire, the tyrant who seems to hold all the cards, and starts to trust in God.*"

⁶ James Fordyce (1720-1796). It's from a work he wrote called Answer to a Gentleman who apologized to the Author for Swearing. What a great title! https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/James_Fordyce