

Who's Afraid?  
By Rev. Michael R. Blackwood  
United Church of Broomfield  
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Exodus 14:13-14

13 But Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid. Stand your ground, and watch the Lord rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never ever see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you. You just keep still."

Zephaniah 3:16-20

On that day, it will be said to Jerusalem:

Don't fear, Zion.

Don't let your hands fall.

<sup>17</sup>The Lord your God is in your midst—a warrior bringing victory.

He will create calm with his love;

he will rejoice over you with singing.

<sup>18</sup> I will remove from you those worried about the appointed feasts.<sup>[a]</sup>

They have been a burden for her, a reproach.

<sup>19</sup> Watch what I am about to do to all your oppressors at that time.

I will deliver the lame;

I will gather the outcast.

I will change their shame into praise and fame throughout the earth.

<sup>20</sup> At that time, I will bring all of you back,

at the time when I gather you.

I will give you fame and praise among all the neighboring peoples

when I restore your possessions and you can see them<sup>[b]</sup>—says the Lord.

Psalms 46

God is our refuge and strength,  
a help always near in times of great trouble.

2 That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart,  
when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea,

3 when its waters roar and rage,  
when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. Selah

4 There is a river whose streams gladden God's city,  
the holiest dwelling of the Most High.

5 God is in that city. It will never crumble.  
God will help it when morning dawns.

6 Nations roar; kingdoms crumble.  
God utters his voice; the earth melts.

7 The Lord of heavenly forces is with us!  
The God of Jacob is our place of safety. Selah

8 Come, see the Lord's deeds,  
what devastation he has imposed on the earth—

9 bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world,  
breaking the bow and shattering the spear,  
burning chariots with fire.

10 “That’s enough! Now know that I am God!

I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world!”

11 The Lord of heavenly forces is with us!

The God of Jacob is our place of safety. Selah

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Fear is certainly an emotion that gets our attention! No matter how tough or prepared we are in life, fear creeps up on all of us. In fact, if I took a poll today and asked how many of you are worried or anxious about something going on in your life the majority of you would raise your hands. Perhaps it has to do with family or a job or a personal struggle. We are all familiar with fear and anxiety.

So is God. God knew of the people’s fears and sent prophets to guide and reassure. The prophet Zephaniah said, don’t fear, God is your warrior, God will deliver the lame, gather the outcast and change shame into praise and fame. Psalm 46 was written to combat our fears and anxieties – God is our refuge and strength.

Jesus often saw fear in those that he loved. Jesus constantly confronted the problem of fear. If you look through the gospels you see that Jesus is always saying: “Fear not! Don’t be overanxious. Do not let your heart be troubled. Do not let it be afraid. Do not worry.” And, of course, Jesus asked the familiar question, “Why are you so afraid?”

### **Fear Is Healthy**

If we are honest, we get defensive when we hear Jesus’ question and respond: “We are afraid because there is a lot for us to be afraid of these days – wildfires burning out of control, temperatures reaching record highs for record durations, racial injustice, political division, (with Justice Ginsburg’s death on Friday, political anxieties for everyone have gone through the roof) --- and then we can’t forget to mention all of our personal fears.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University reported 30 years ago that the greatest fears of grade school children were: 1) Animals, 2) Being in a dark room, 3) High places, 4) Strangers, 5) Loud noises. Today, kids are afraid of the following: 1) Divorce, 2) Terrorism, 3) Cancer, 4) Pollution, 5) Being assaulted.

Times have changed and so have our fears!

You want to know the top five fears of adults today? 5) Intimacy, 4) The Dark, 3) Heights, 2) Flying, 1) Public Speaking. Death didn’t even make the top 5! It was number 6. This means that most of you would rather die in a plane crash at night sitting next to someone they don’t like than get up here and do I am doing right now. You know what I call that? Job security!

Honestly, there are many things for us to fear. There is good reason for us to fear the things we do. Fear is healthy. God has given us the emotion of fear for a purpose. I don’t trust a pilot who is not afraid, just a little bit. They will not be focused enough. Experts in aviation say complacency is a pilot’s worst enemy. You could say the same for all of us. A lot of us are alive because at one time we had a healthy fear of something that threatened us. We should never get rid of fear. We want children to be afraid of certain things: matches, suspicious strangers, drugs, drinking and maybe driving (I believe Vaughn just got his permit).

### **Fear is Constructive**

Fear serves a great purpose. It protects us. It also motivates us to do the right thing. Why do you pay your income tax? Because you like to write checks to the government? No, because you fear getting a penalty or

going to jail! Why do we take out fire insurance? Why do we lock our doors or pay for elaborate alarm systems? Because we like to spend money? No. We want to protect ourselves (J. Wallace Hamilton, *Ride the Wild Horses*, p. 104).

Let's face it! We are motivated by fear everyday of our lives, and fear causes us to do good and constructive things.

I am glad there is fear and worry in the world! We worry enough about our lives and health to put on a seat belts, wear facial masks and stay six feet from each other. We worry enough about our friends and family in this church to pray for them and check on them when they hurt.

Everyone I know who has done something valuable in this world has worried about something significant. Moses worried about the people of God. Mother Theresa worried about those dying in Calcutta. Albert Schweitzer worried about disease. Abraham Lincoln worried about our country. Martin Luther worried about the church. Martin Luther King, Jr. worried about racism. Jesus Christ worried about the least, the last, and the lost. God worried enough about this world to come down in Jesus Christ to die for us so that we could be free, so that we could be whole. Fear has a great purpose in this world.

### **Fear Gone Bad**

However, like many things that God has given us, fear can be perverted. Fear is often the tool of evil. I have seen fear paralyze people and steal joy from people's lives. I have seen fear stilt creativity and energy. I have seen fear put people into a frenzy. In fact, psychologists have put a name to many of the irrational fears people have:

Peladophobia: fear of baldness and bald people.

Aerophobia: fear of drafts.

Claustrophobia: fear of closed spaces

Agoraphobia: fear of open spaces

Chaetophobia: fear of hairy people.

Levophobia: fear of objects on the left side of the body.

Dextrophobia: fear of objects on the right side of the body.

Photophobia: fear of lights

Auroraphobia: fear of the northern lights.

Calyprophobia: fear of obscure meanings.

Thalassophobia: fear of being seated.

Stabisbasiphobia: fear of standing and walking.

Ergophobia: fear of work.

Neophobia: fear of the new

Odontophobia: fear of teeth.

Graphophobia: fear of writing in public.

Phobophobia: fear of being afraid.

We find humor in these fears, but they are tragic. They are overriding fears that control and destroy the lives of people. They are obsessive fears and worries that tear people's lives apart. This is the kind of fear we are talking about today. *This is the elephant in the room*: fears that we don't have a handle on.<sup>1</sup>

Our reading from Exodus today is brief and concise: "Don't be afraid. Stand your ground, and watch the Lord rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never ever see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you. You just keep still."

What was happening at that moment? The Israelites were running from the Egyptians. They had been enslaved for decades and were now running for their lives, literally. "They were terrified and cried out to the Lord."

They needed to be reminded that fear is normal, healthy and constructive – it's unrealistic to think you'll never worry. Don't let it rule our lives. And in the midst of fear going bad for the Israelites, Moses wouldn't let it. God will fight for you. Just keep still!!

### **Move from Fear to Faith**

In the gospel of Mark there is a scene where Jesus and his disciples are on a boat and a storm begins to rage. The disciples are terrified, and they find Jesus asleep. This angers the disciples. They think Jesus is being insensitive to their needs. However, what the disciples did not realize was that Jesus was providing them an example of faith. He was so close to his God that nothing rattled him.

There is a true story about a tiger trainer in a big circus troupe whose act was putting tigers through their paces. One night as he was performing a car driving a half mile from the circus hit a power line and all the lights in the circus arena went out. There he was in the dark with a bunch of hungry tigers.

The man panicked for a moment but soon began speaking to the tigers and cracking his whip in his usual manner. The crowd could not see what was happening and everyone was terrified. Before long, the lights came back on, and the act continued normally. Later, a reporter asked the trainer what it was like to be in a cage full of tigers in the dark. He said, "At first, I was really scared. I knew the tigers could see me, for they can see in the dark. Then I realized that the tigers had no idea I could not see them. That's when I began to speak and crack my whip the way I always do. It worked because they were not aware of any change in the usual performance."

When the lights go out and your fears begin to roar, stand up to them and know that God is on your side. The lights will turn on again and your fear will scurry away. God will be your warrior and clear a path for you. So, don't be afraid – just be still. Can you do that? Just be still.

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Gracious God,  
We place ourselves in your presence.

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<sup>1</sup> Reeb, Charley.

Our minds and our spirits are cluttered.  
Help us make space for you.  
Help us to be fully present here, now.

We release to you all that we have done today—  
whether for good or for ill.

We release all that we feel like we should have done today but did not do.

We release all of the people who weigh on our hearts and minds this evening.

We release our fears.  
We release our anxiety.  
We release our impatience.  
We release our pride.

All of the thoughts, all of the feelings that pull us away from you, O God, we release.

And now with open hearts we receive what you offer us now:

We receive the gift of this space and this time.  
We receive the gift of being with each person here.  
We receive the Holy Spirit's presence within us for guidance and healing.  
We receive the sacred words that will be spoken and thought.  
We receive the holy touch of hand and heart.  
We receive the silence.  
We receive the music.

Fill us now with the peace of your deep, abiding presence.  
We offer all of ourselves to you, our One God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Harader, Joanna. [www.re-worship.blogspot.com](http://www.re-worship.blogspot.com). 2014 Nov 28.