

27th **After Pentecost: November** 16, 2008

Sermon: What are you afraid of?

What are you afraid of? I've asked a number of children that question, and I always find the answers interesting. Sometimes it's spiders; sometimes it's the dark; sometimes it's snakes; sometimes it's storms. Sometimes the answers are a little different: "Flies when my bother pulls the legs off them and throws them at me." "My sister's cat". Some insist that they aren't afraid of anything –and maybe they aren't.

Adults will give similar responses at first. But after we spend some time talking, we might hear some different things. "I'm afraid of failing." "I'm afraid of not having enough for the future – especially in these days of falling markets and threatening recession." "I'm afraid that things are spinning out of control". "I'm afraid no-one will love me, or even like me." "I'm afraid of being hurt". "I'm afraid of upsetting people or rocking the boat." "I'm afraid of being alone." "I'm afraid of dying."

How much of our lives is dominated by fear! I would be surprised if there is any person over the age of 16 in this congregation who hasn't sometimes lain awake at night, with the worries and anxieties of the day circling around their head like the water in a toilet – only they won't flush! The thoughts just keep whirling, and whirling and whirling – and they paralyze us.

That's what happened to the man in the parable. He was afraid, and so he did what a lot of people would do who were in the same boat. He hid the money until his master came back. Now, we need to be careful about too literal an interpretation of this parable. The standard approach is to say that the master is God and the servant is a member of the church. But the absent master is called a "hard" or "severe" man. Are we really to take it that the master represents God? Furthermore, to the Torah-abiding Jews who first heard this story, the master's approval of receiving interest on loans would have suggested he was no respecter of God's laws –laws which strongly discouraged profit-making from loans. When Jesus told the story, the morality of the absent master was questionable. So it's not really helpful to suggest the master is either Jesus or God. Perhaps the "hard" master in the story is a representation of the harsh social and economic realities that people face – realities like the ones we face today. Or perhaps the third servant has misunderstood the character of his master. Regardless, the primary focus of this parable was not the character of master but the behavior of the third servant.

Perhaps the perceived danger to the servant was real – perhaps it wasn't. But still, he is judged for letting his fear keeping him from acting boldly, despite any danger. There is a common theme in this collection of stories from Matthew's gospel: He wants to make it clear that belonging to the Christian church is not enough. Faithfulness demands more. It demands attention to God's will and righteous action, while we wait for Christ to come again....

Look at the rather abbreviated story from the Book of Judges. The Israelite people are under threat from a neighbouring city-state, which has oppressed the people for 20 years, and now has gathered its army of 900 chariots and huge numbers of soldiers and is poised to strike. People come to Deborah looking for

guidance, wanting to know how to deal with this fearsome enemy, which is led by a general who is known for his brilliance and his harshness.

Fear of invasion in this story's time and place is fully justified – the kind of fear people in Darfur refugee camps feel; the kind of fear that is erupting in the Congo yet again. This is the fear of men who will be killed in battle; of women raped or carried off into slavery; of children who will lose their parents and become slaves themselves; of crops burned and flocks stolen away. But in the face of this overwhelming threat, Deborah does not council evacuation, or offering tribute to buy off the enemy, or any other such temporary solution. She counsels action. She sends for Barak, a proven warrior, and commands him in the name of God to lead the people to battle. Barak is afraid to go, and says he won't do it unless Deborah goes with him for reassurance. Deborah does so, and the Israelites triumph. The great general Sisera eventually dies at the hand of a woman named Jael, a member of a tribe allied to Israel.

Now, it's a bloody story, and none of us believe God wants us to go out and slaughter those who threaten us –at least, I hope we don't! The story is a product of its time and place, and shouldn't be taken as a guideline as to how the modern armies of Christian states should behave. But it is also true that there is evil in this world: there are powers and systems and individuals whose goal is to destroy, or whose nature is destruction. There are those who would harm or kill the body, and those who would damage the spirit. Whether it is the local gossip who shreds people with his or her tongue, the poisonous antagonist who spreads negativity and trouble just because he can, the guerrilla soldiers threatening a village of innocent people, or a deadly disease like AIDS or avian flu, we cannot fail to act because of fear. We have to stand together, like Barak and Deborah and the people of Israel, and find our strength in God and in each other, to face our fears – to face the things that keep us awake at night and cause us to sink into inaction and despair.

A study of Canadians done a few years ago suggested that one of the primary health problems facing Canadians is the effect of stress. Another study suggests that nearly half the American people are consumed with one form or another of worry. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and instructor at the Harvard Medical School in Boston, even wrote a book about the subject, *Worry: Hope and Help for a Common Condition*, published in 1998 by Ballantine Books. "Good worry is worry that leads to constructive action," he told *People* magazine that year. In other words, good worry works. "Toxic worry," Hallowell goes on to say, "does just the opposite. It paralyzes you. You brood, you ruminate, you wake up in the middle of the night. Meanwhile you don't take action" (*People*, October 26, 1998, 145ff.) This toxic worry is just another name for fear: fear of all kinds of things, real or imagined.

Doesn't that sound like the servant who took his talent and hid it? I don't want to psychologize about this character too much, but I can just imagine that servant lying awake at night, wondering if he'd done the right thing, fearful of the consequences no matter what he did, and therefore, doing nothing much at all. Contrast this with what Paul has to say in the letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul is talking about a community that is anticipating the second coming of Christ at any time. Nowadays, the primary attitude of movies about this event is terror: they seem designed to frighten people into faith. But nowhere does Paul talk about being fearful in the face of Christ's coming. Instead, he says, stand firm, be sober, don't get excited or carried away. "Put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet, the hope of salvation". Faith, hope and love, are all you need to face whatever's coming, whatever you're dealing with, whatever you are afraid of. So, "encourage one another" says Paul, "and build up each other." Encourage one another to tell people when their behaviour is inappropriate; encourage one another to follow the call of God, even if it means big changes in their lives; encourage one another to face the bogeyman of cancer or MS or Alzheimers'; encourage one another to speak up in public for what they believe to be right; encourage one another to place resources and abilities in the service of God.

Be like Deborah to Barak; be like Paul to the church in Thessalonika; be like a comrade in arms who gets you through the worst the enemy throws at you; find a Paul or a Deborah to support and encourage you. Don't let your fears get a hold of you, but instead, move forward in hope and in the strength of God.

Next week we will hear the grand finale of this series of parables from Matthew: the passage that sums it all up. I'm not going to tell you what it is, because I really don't have to. You know what God requires of us: to love God with all of our devotion, to love our neighbour and work for his or her well-being, to behave in every way like a child of the light and a follower of Jesus. And we can't let fear get in the way of that. Together, as the body of Christ, we can face our fears. We can stand up to the ghosts and demons that haunt us in the night. God has given us what we need to withstand all that threatens life, and all that keeps us paralysed with fear.

I want to share with you a final thought: something to help you reflect on your fears and your faith. I may have shared this with you before:

Quoting Marianne Williamson, NELSON MANDELLA, in his Inaugural Speech in 1994 said this about fear. "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. " Isn't that a wonderful thought!

So, put on the armour of faith and love, and the helmet of hope, and be a soldier of the light. Stand shoulder to shoulder with the rest of God's people, and you will triumph. For you are a child of God, and God's loving power cannot be defeated. Amen.