

FAITH, FEAR, AND FRAGILITY

Lent 2: Holding on...letting go

Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35

We're just starting the second decade of the new millennium.
People like to name decades after some dominant characteristic of the time—Roaring '20s, Decade of Decadence, etc.
If I were to name the decade we just *finished* a couple months ago, I would call it the Decade of Fear.
People have *always* struggled with fears, to some extent.
But I think this past decade stands in a league of its own.
It began 10 years ago with Y2K:
we were afraid computers would bring the world crashing down.
People built underground bunkers
full of canned goods, water, and guns.
Then a year later, the 9-11 terrorist attacks changed us forever:
we literally embraced fear as the only way to survive.
Again, people reinforced and stocked their bunkers.
We were all urged to be suspicious and vigilant
and to be *very afraid* whenever our government raised the official threat level from orange to red.
All through this decade
we discovered countless new ways to be afraid—
of people with bombs in their shoes or underwear,
of snipers,
of kidnappers,
of school shooters,
of H1-N1 virus,
of food bacteria.
The divisive politics in the last couple national elections
have elevated fear to new levels.
The more polarized we have become,
the more our weapon of choice is fear—for *both* ends of the pole.
People on the left have been taught to be afraid of
evangelical Christians,
anti-abortionists,
tea party protestors,
and Sarah Palin.

People on the right have been taught to be afraid of
environmentalists,
gays and lesbians,
socialists,
and Barack Obama.

We are encouraged by the media not only to be suspicious,
but to be downright afraid,
constantly on guard against the “enemy,”
who is clearly hell-bent on destroying us,
and destroying the life we cherish.

But I don't blame big corporate media for all of this.
They produce what they know we want to hear.
Because if we don't *watch* it, companies won't *sponsor* it.
Thoughtful, rational sustained discussion of differing viewpoints,
doesn't sell on cable TV.
If people who disagree, sit and respectfully listen to each other,
and ask questions to build understanding,
it doesn't pull in the big money.
It's just too boring for us, the American public.
We want people yelling at each other,
shaking their fists,
exaggerating,
misrepresenting,
and calling each other names.
We want talk show hosts who will find the most *extreme* case,
and then tell us that *everyone* on the other side
is *just . . . like . . . that!*
which is why we need to be *afraid of them*.

It is getting harder and harder, in the Age of Fear,
to find a source of news that informs, rather than inflames.

Not all fear is a bad thing, of course.
When I face a situation where suddenly—
life and death hangs in the balance—
I, for one, am *glad* that God created in us a fear instinct.

It's life-giving fear that seizes us
and makes us step back from the edge of a cliff,
or run away from a mad dog,
or take cover when bullets fly.

Thank God for that kind of fear.

But the fear *I'm* talking about, the fear of this age,
is a fear that drives us away from others.

It's a fear that makes us take on a posture
of self-protection and isolation
instead of openness and hospitality.

That kind of fear is *not* life-giving.

It sucks life out of us.

It keeps us stuck in whatever feels safe and secure.

It prevents us from going where God is calling us.

It robs us of the full and abundant life God desires for us.

And it's that kind of fear God warns us about in scripture.

Fears that paralyze, that hinder, that destroy,
are *not* the work of a good Creator,
they are from the Evil One.

These are the fears referred to when scripture says,

"Be not afraid."

"Fear not, I am with you always."

"Perfect love casts out all fear."

"Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change."

"With the Lord on my side I do not fear."

And from today's reading in Ps. 27.

"The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall *I* fear?"

If we allow fear to turn us away from where God is calling us,
then *that* fear is sin.

And we need to confess that fear.

And we need to be delivered of that fear.

A lot easier said than done,

but God does provide what we need to face our fears
and learn to live with them.

We heard about it this morning in Luke 13.

Jesus looked at the city of Jerusalem,
full of people that God dearly loved,
and the image that came to Jesus' mind was a chicken—
a mother hen and her chicks.

Jesus said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . .

How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
and you were not willing!"

I love to picture that in my mind.

I know chickens.

I didn't grow up a chicken farm,

but we *always* had a backyard chicken coop when I was a kid.

I've seen, many times, how a mother hen acts

when she *suddenly* thinks it's time

for her chicks to gather in under her wings.

She sounds the alarm in no uncertain terms,
and they come running.

And they don't trickle in one at a time.

They come immediately, en masse.

And they *all* end up under the shelter of her wings,
all of them together in one place,
all of them under one set of mothering wings.

That's an image to hold on to
as a way to live with our fears.

Baby chicks find strength being in community,

under the protection of the one that formed the community.

All baby chicks, by nature's instinct, know who they are.

They are part of a brood . . . a flock . . .

who all belong to a particular mother.

That reality defines them. *Completely.*

Alone, they could never survive.

That's why Jesus used the image of a hen and chicks.

That's why the psalmist wrote poetry about
finding refuge under the shelter of God's wings.

God doesn't want us to be afraid.

God wants us to be chicken.

God wants us to run, *together*, *en masse*,
and seek shelter under God's wings.

Now, don't misunderstand.

Running under God's wings is not escapism.

We're not trying to *avoid* dealing with a real threat.

No, God wants us there because that is the place
where we can best confront our fears.

That's the place where we know clearly and experience deeply
who we are and to whom we belong.

When we have a community of persons to be with
who trust in the same mothering God we trust in,
when we are in right relationship with that God,
and with each other,

then we have a strong basis on which
to face our fears with confidence,
individually and collectively.

We find that confidence with each other, under God's wings.

Being "chicken" in that way, is nothing to be ashamed of.

It's the biblical response to the fears we face.

It's also the precise antidote we need

for the kind of fears our culture tries to instill in us.

Look at almost any example of fears from the last decade—

from the Y2K panic to the color-coded war on terrorism,

from over-reactive journalists to over-protective parents,

from H1N1 to E-Coli,

from Glenn Beck to Ed Shultz.

Fear-mongering is the stock-in-trade

of partisan politics,

of extreme activist groups on the right and left,

of most mainstream media outlets,

and of a lot of popular entertainment.

For certain groups, for certain powers-that-be,

it's actually profitable, good for the bottom line,

if the general populace stays afraid much of the time.

It helps sell the protection they have to offer.

And the way to make sure people *stay afraid*,

is to keep them from doing what little chicks do—

keep them from coming together,

and drawing strength from their common identity.

So they try to convince you that you really *are* on your own,

that you are the only person you can trust,

that if you don't take of *yourself first*,

nobody else is going to.

Why else do you think gun sales are up everywhere?

Why are lawmakers voting in recent weeks to make it even easier

to carry loaded guns on college campuses and restaurants?

Faith in Jesus Christ *calls* us to resist this mass cultural hysteria.

The response of faith,

is *not* a response of suspicion, separation, and human isolation.

The response of faith does *not* first protect my own self-interest.

The response of faith moves me toward the other.

And in so doing, moves me toward God.

The response of faith is a response of love.

That's why we read in 1 John,

"There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear."

Fear and love are incompatible. They are opposites.

Love draws us out of ourselves and toward the other.

Fear draws us into ourselves, and away from the other.

Love casts out fear.

And followers of Jesus are called to love.

So a gathering of Christians should be the *last place on earth*,

where people rally support for a cause

by instilling fear, and anxiety,

and creating distance between ourselves

and those who are different from us.

But I think we know all too well,

that's not always the case.

The merchants of fear also operate in the church.

We are called to be a people of peace,
a people secure in our identity in Jesus Christ,
a people who answer to a Lord who made a habit of saying,
Fear not. Peace be with you. I am with you always.

Of course, if we *do* find peace and security in Christ,
if we are freed from our fears,
that's *not* a guarantee we escape injury
from that which threatens us.

Isaiah 43 says,

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.”

Not *if*. *When*.

God's people *will* keep on passing through raging waters,
and fire, and storm, and earthquake.
And *where* is God in the storm?
Where was God when the earth shook
in Haiti, or in Chile yesterday?

Well, I can tell you God wasn't sitting in a La-Z-Boy watching CNN.
God was right there under the rubble.
It might not make sense to us, but it's the Gospel truth.
God suffers with us.
God shares our dark, cramped, and painful space of suffering.

God is with us . . . right in the *middle of the place* . . .
where our fears are most real, most intense.
We are invited to be “chicken” in the good way.
To find ourselves—and help each other find—
the shelter of God's wings,
and gather under those wings together.
We are invited to come to a place
where we are holding on to that oft-repeated promise
that God is with us . . . always,
and are letting go of those persistent fears that bind us,
that pull us into ourselves and away from others,
that prevent us from living the life to which God called us.

I don't know what kind of persistent fears trouble you.

I only know about *mine*.

As someone who has been a perfectionist from the day I was born,
and who now leads a fairly public kind of life,
I know I have to battle the fear of failure,
the fear of looking foolish or stupid in the eyes of others,
so I like to play it fairly safe.
I'm cautious.
Which is good sometimes,
but probably also keeps me from stepping into the unknown,
where God just might be calling me occasionally.

I don't know your fears.

Many of us fear failure, or fear loss.

We fear illness and death.

We fear broken relationships.

We fear being alone.

We fear loss of control over our lives.

We fear for our emotional and mental well-being.

Perhaps the stress is so great,

we feel we are on the edge every day,

and live with a constant fear of falling off.

Maybe we fear economic catastrophe.

Maybe we fear a longtime relationship

with a spouse, or a dear friend,

is about to slip away forever.

Maybe we are facing a serious illness,

the potential end of our lives, or the life of someone we love.

And fear is paralyzing us.

We are invited to hold on, and let go.

To hold on to the promises of a God who longs to shelter us
as a mother hen with her chicks.

To hold on to the cross of Jesus Christ,

a symbol of the most profound suffering we can imagine,

that was transformed to a symbol of the glory of God.

And to let go of our fears—

fears that draw us into ourselves,

fears that keep us from stepping forward

into whatever scary place God is calling us,
a place *where God is already there*.

I invite us again,
as we are doing each Sunday during Lent,
to a time of confession, in both word and action.

In the narrow blue folders in your hymnal rack,
you will find small pieces of tissue paper.
If you want to participate in this act of confession,
simply name the fear with which you are struggling today.
You need only write a word or a few words if you wish.
Then begin the act of holding on, and letting go.
Hold on to Christ, and let go of your fears,
by approaching the cross,
this image of humiliation made into an image of glory,
a symbol of fear made into a symbol of love,
and come to this water bowl, representing God's healing stream,
and release your fear, written on the tissue paper,
onto the surface of that water.
Let it be soaked up by that water, and softened,
and eventually, dissolved.

If it is physically difficult for you to make the walk forward,
be bold to ask someone else to carry your confession for you.

During this act of confession,
we will be singing together in the purple hymnal, Sing the Story,
number 63, "God, fill me now."

Come whenever you are ready.

—*Phil Kniss, February 28, 2010*