

“WHO ME? AFRAID?”

2 Timothy 1:3-14; Matthew 26:36-39

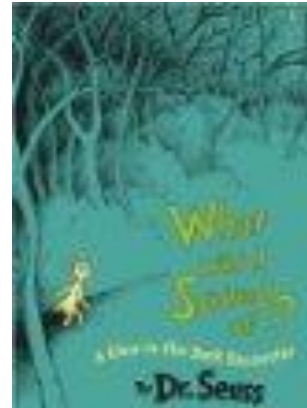
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Close your eyes for a minute. With your eyes closed, imagine that one thing that you are afraid of. Is it the dark? Or being alone? Or snakes and spiders? Or wild animals? Maybe it's the boogeyman...that fictitious creature that lives in our bedroom closet or under our bed.

Go ahead and open your eyes. Does anyone want to name that thing that you are afraid of?

For me, it's heights. For as long as I can remember, I've gotten that funny, butterfly-like feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever I do so much as think about heights. I can be watching a television show or a movie and see someone walking close to the edge of a bridge or tall building and get that same feeling in my stomach.

When I was in college I took advantage of the employment program that my dad's employer offered. Dependent children of employees who were home from college for the summer could apply for a job – and I did. My dad worked for Northwest Airlines, and so I spent the summer working for them doing a variety of odd jobs.



While some of my colleagues got to work on cleaning crews on the airplanes, I worked in and around the hangars. One day, our supervisor told us that we would be working on top of one of the hangars. Some maintenance work had recently been done, and it was going to be our job to clean up the site. We climbed the ladder on the inside of the building and soon saw the clouds and sunshine above.

Our task, we were told, would be to pick up anything that didn't belong on the roof and drop it into the dumpster below. You know how on some construction sites you see a long chute running from the roof or a window down to the trash bin below? There wasn't one! That meant we had to walk to the edge of the building and toss the trash down to the ground below.

Being a young college student in need of a job (and the money!), I didn't say anything about my fear of heights. Instead I went about the assigned task quietly and fearfully. However, I learned something that day. No, I didn't conquer my fear of heights. I learned that you can stand about 10 feet away from the edge of a tall building and still toss things over the side!

For most people, the most uncomfortable human emotion of all is fear. It has the ability to paralyze us and keep us from doing something that needs to be done or that we truly

enjoy. That childhood fear of the boogeyman often represents all of those things in the world that we've yet to encounter.

As we grow older, we often maintain a sense of healthy fear. While we may no longer call what we are afraid of the boogeyman (or bogeywoman, to be fair), our fears are still very real. Teenagers may fear rejection or failure or being left out. Young adults may fear never finding a life partner or a fulfilling career. Adults who thought they had left their fears behind when they grew up now find themselves with a brand new set of fears – often living the fears of their children. Even older adults face fears – losing their independence, their health, their mobility, or their capacity to support themselves financially.

In this, the third week of our “Gospel According to Dr. Seuss” series, we look at the good doctor’s book *What Was I Scared Of?* – which addresses the issue of fear. The story is a simple one in terms of its design – it has only two characters: a cute-looking childlike “creacha” and “a pair of pale green pants with nobody inside them.”

The “creacha,” who is out for a walk one night, spots these phantom pants and runs in the opposite direction, telling himself that he’s not afraid...but it doesn’t work. With every page of the book, the “creacha” encounters that pair of pale green pants with nobody inside them...and every time he is afraid.

This little guy’s fears soon begin to have a negative impact on his life. He doesn’t go the places he used to go or do the things he used to do. He even stays away from Grin-itch where he would usually get his spinach. That’s a paralyzing fear!

Many of us – if not all of us – can identify with our friend. Our fears often keep us from reaching our full potential. There are places we’d like to go, people we’d like to reach out to, issues we’d like to confront – but we’re afraid. We’re afraid of the emotional impact it might have on us, we’re afraid of the time we might have to devote to this new endeavor, we’re afraid of what others might think about us. In the church we give voice to this fear by saying things like, “We might lose members,” or “We might scare off new visitors.” Even those people and places God is calling us to get set aside because of our fears.

Theologically speaking, the opposite of fear is faith. While faith will not eliminate our fears, faith does give us the discipline, confidence and courage to move forward in spite of our fears. Our faith reaffirms for us that God is ultimately in control and that what God wants for us more than anything else, is the very, very best. It has been said that the best place to be and the safest place to be are one in the same – at the center of God’s will. Thus, if we are confident that we are pursuing the will of God, we can also believe that our fears, though real, ought not paralyze us...they ought not keep us from doing what is right.

Paul wrote, in the first chapter, seventh verse of the second letter to Timothy, “For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-

discipline.” God did not give us a spirit of cowardice...in other translations that word is timidity or fear. God did not give us a spirit of fear, so that means fear is something we have taken on from some other source. But fear is real. And on at least one occasion, God expressed fear.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the Son of God prayed. We don't know much about that prayer, but one sentence is written in three of the gospels: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”

It's hard to imagine anyone being more afraid than Jesus must have been in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew what was coming. He knew that the path he was on would lead him to an arrest, an unfair trial, mocking and beating, and finally a horrific and painful death. He would soon be completely abandoned – betrayed by one of his disciples and denied by his closest friends. And he was afraid.

“If it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” Jesus was asking that if there were any other way to save the world, that would be his preference. Anything but the whip. Anything but the crown of thorns. Anything but the cross. But he did not allow this unspeakable fear keep him from pressing on to accomplish his divine mission. He did not run away from his fears – he faced them head on: “Not what I want, but what you want.”

Dr. Seuss also helps up to understand the secret to overcoming our fears. The secret is not to run faster or farther in the opposite direction. That only provides temporary relief from our fears. The problem is that they keep coming back – or we keep meeting them in new places. The only way to overcome our fears is to face them.

What might happen in our Christian lives if we were able to do this – face our fears instead of running from them? What might happen in the church? Might we be freed to do that thing we've always felt called to do, but were too afraid to venture out and do it? Might we be freed to talk to that person we've always seen standing alone in the lobby or hallway of the church, but were too afraid of what someone else might say to us or about us?

Fears limit our ability to reach our full potential as individuals and as the church. We need to recognize that the kingdom of God is not a passive institution but a proactive one. God did not call us to sit in our living rooms watching TV, content with the status quo. God did not call us to a spirit of timidity or fear. No, God calls us to go out into the world to provide food where there is hunger, opportunities where there is poverty, spiritual nourishment where there is spiritual longing, healing where there is brokenness, hope where there is despair, and justice where there is oppression. God calls us to go out into the world proclaiming Christ to all, and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Think about the fears that we have. What is it that is holding us back? What is it that is keeping us from being all that we can be and all that we'd like to be? Once we've identified ‘the pale green pants’ in our midst, then we can face them – we can talk about

them – we can seek advice – we can find others who have faced similar fears and overcome them – and we can make them our friend. Like the little “creacha” from the story, when we’re able to face our fears we find that we not only gain a new friend, but our lives will be restored – and likely enhanced.

I want to go back to where we started this morning. Close your eyes. But this time, instead of picturing a fear, try to create a picture where fear is absent. What would your own personal life look like? What would the church look like? When I open my eyes, I think I can see some smiles on your faces. Isn’t that the kind of life we should try to create?

“God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” May we live with *that* kind of power! AMEN.