

**Sermon for Epiphany 4B - Jan. 29, 2012**  
**Peter Wallace – St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, LaGrange, GA**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you  
O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

If we pay any attention to the news media,  
    we are bombarded continually by dreadful economic news,  
    the latest terrorist threats, the newest health calamities.  
What’s worse, we’re in the midst of a political campaign,  
    and the candidates are trying to outdo one another  
    in frightening the voters.  
But as I heard Bishop Neil Alexander say,  
    “*We live on the corner at the intersection of Terror and Promise.*”  
We must determine which way to go.

Now, there are good reasons to fear;  
    it’s wise to be alert to potential dangers.  
But when we worry ourselves over *possible* future events  
    or situations *outside* our control,  
    when we let fear strangle us,  
    we are missing God’s best for us.  
We have plenty of reasons for our anxiety...  
    Why did my boss gave me that funny look at the staff meeting  
    about possible cuts?  
Why haven’t I heard from my daughter?  
    What if my spouse contracts a serious illness  
    or has a serious accident?  
    And how am I going to pay for that unexpected roof repair?  
We worry not only about ourselves, but our children, grandchildren, our  
    parents, grandparents, other family and friends...  
We have more than enough reasons to be afraid.

During my discernment placement for the Episcopal priesthood,  
    I found myself in a loving and supportive place  
    here at St. Mark’s, with a great mentor in Fr. Allen,  
    and I will always be grateful for it.  
But now I find myself in a place of worry if not fear  
    about my future path.  
    How will it go?  
    Will I make it?  
This Thursday I am to meet with the Commission on Ministry of the

Diocese of Atlanta, where they will interrogate me—  
I mean *interview* me—about my calling and qualifications,  
before they decide whether I should continue in the process.  
And if they send me to the bishop, what next? Seminary classes?  
But what about my job responsibilities?  
What about the book I'm supposed to be writing?  
What about my loved ones, family and friends—  
how will all this affect them?  
How will I make it work?

Often we try to escape the fear we feel by running away—  
through mind-altering substances, distracting pursuits,  
or even by literally running away from our circumstances.  
Even so, we often discover that our fear follows us relentlessly.

Many soldiers in Iraq and throughout the Middle East have reported  
their fear of a huge spider, the “Camel Spider.”

They are approximately eight to *twelve* inches in length.

They are fast and aggressive.

Many soldiers have claimed they were chased by these camel spiders.

But here's what happens: They see one of these horrific creatures  
and run away in panic, only to see the spiders chasing them—  
at a speed of up to ten miles per hour.

But the reason the spiders chase the fearful soldiers  
is not to attack them,  
but to stay in their shade!

The camel spiders are nocturnal, they can't stand light.

So during the day, they burrow into the sand.

But if they are disturbed and come out into strong sunlight,  
they will look for the nearest shade—  
which might be coming from the body of a soldier.

If he runs, the spiders will chase him just to stay in his shadow.

I think we can all identify with the feeling of running from our fears  
only to find they can run faster than we can.

Living in fear is no way to live.

Fear can cause us to weaken and shrink,  
to blow up in anger, to fall into chronic illness,  
to avoid fulfilling our responsibilities as followers of Christ  
to serve the needy and stand up for the oppressed.

Fear can cause us to protect ourselves so carefully

that we numb out and miss the fullness that life offers us.

But as one minister writes, [Scott Bader-Saye]

“We cannot command ourselves to feel less fear.

Quite the contrary, our overwhelming fears  
need, *themselves*, to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things,  
by a sense of adventure and fullness of life  
that comes from locating our fears and vulnerabilities  
within a larger story that is ultimately hopeful and not tragic.”

So what are we to do with our fears?

Well, we can learn much from Jesus about how to  
overwhelm our fears with “bigger and better things,”  
to overcome the paralyzing fear and anxiety  
that can keep us from experiencing an abundant,  
liberated, meaningful life.

Jesus offers real hope as we confront our fears,  
and that hope is in the love—and, perhaps ironically,  
in the *fear*—of *God*.

The Scriptures offer rich encouragement  
with numerous exhortations, even commands,  
to live in *hope* rather than *fear*.

Hope is a positive expectation for the future, it’s the opposite of fear.

And true, lasting hope can only be found in God.

In fact, scholars note that the Bible tells us,

“Do not be afraid” 366 times—so there’s one such encouragement  
for each day of the year, even leap years like this one.

When we are in relationship with the God who loves us utterly,

When we live our lives with integrity and openness to whatever  
God might send our way, we have nothing to fear.

As Psalm 127 puts it,

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

And yet, according to the Bible, this kind of *faith* comes out of *fear*—  
fear, not of the future, not of human dangers or earthly catastrophes,  
but the fear of God.

And did you notice what the psalm we heard today, Psalm 111, says?

“The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;

all those who practice it have a good understanding.” (v. 10)

This fear of God is not the fear that causes panic, distress, or anxiety.

The fear of God, is a reverent faith,  
 an awe of the unfathomable power and wisdom of God,  
 a faith sourced in the holiness and otherness of God.

In fact, as one noted Rabbi wrote, the “fear of God”

is the “Hebrew equivalent of ‘religion.’

It is the mainspring of religion, morality, and wisdom....

Fear of God does not make [people] shrink from [God]

as one would from a tyrant or a wild beast;

it draws them nearer to [God] and fills [them] with reverential awe.”

So it is healthy to develop our pure, reverent fear of God,

sourced in God’s limitless love, and let that *faithful* fear of God

overcome the fears and anxieties of this life.

Even though Jesus offers hope in the midst of fear,

he too experienced fear in the world.

How did *he* deal with his fear?

If you read the gospels carefully, you will discover

that in moments of fear, stress, and utter anxiety,

as in the Garden of Gethsemane

just before his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion,

Jesus let himself *feel* his feelings, he cried out, he prayed honestly,

and he trusted God to give him the wisdom and strength

to get through it.

He didn’t stuff his fear inside himself or deny that he was deeply troubled;

he was completely open and transparent about how he felt.

Jesus shared his feelings with his disciples, his friends,

and asked for their prayer and support.

And he trusted God that life would continue beyond this world

in resurrection.

These are the ways Jesus gained courage to press on.

Jesus helps us see that faith in the God worthy of our reverent fear

leaves no room for the fear that can cripple us in life.

When we are in relationship with the God

who loves and cares about us infinitely,

when we are ordering our lives with integrity and openness to

whatever God calls us to or sends our way,  
we have nothing to fear—even in the face of overwhelming odds. Nothing.

There's something remarkable in today's gospel lesson  
that struck me as I thought about all this.

Mark 1:22 says the people were “astounded” at Jesus' teaching.

And then he heals a man with an unclean spirit,

and verse 27 says the people were all “amazed.”

Did you notice those words, *astounded* and *amazed*?

Both of these verbs imply fear.

For instance, the Greek verb translated “amazed” here  
means “to astonish”—*to the point of fright*.

In fact, time and time again throughout Mark's gospel,

the writer describes something Jesus says or does

that leaves the witnesses “astonished,” “afraid,”

“amazed,” or “fearful”.

Yet even though Jesus arouses fear

among those witnesses who heard his radical teachings

and witnessed his miraculous works,

he is the one who offers true hope in the face of this world's fears.

So if those witnesses had been open to God's redemptive work in their lives,

their fear of *Jesus* would have been the same sort

as the reverent fear of *God*.

It was their choice:

Do they run from Jesus,

afraid of who he is and what he will do?

Or do they run *to* him in reverent trust and fearless faith?

That is our choice as well.

Imagine your life without the fear that can strangle and weaken.

Imagine being empowered by the courage

that comes from knowing and trusting your loving Father

in every area of your life.

If that were your reality,

what might you be doing differently today?

Who would you reach out to?

What would you set right?

What outreach might you finally volunteer for?

What holy risks would you take?

Living fully and meaningfully requires  
that we acknowledge the power that unhealthy fear has  
on our behavior, on our attitudes, on our whole life.  
Without the courage of faith in the face of fear,  
we may miss out on some immense blessing, gift, or calling of God.  
Let us ask God to shine the light of God's limitless and lively love,  
onto the dark, fearful areas of our hearts.  
When we do, we'll find we can't wait  
to see where God takes us next.