

*Wandering Without Fear*

Second Sunday of Lent

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Text: Genesis 15

Psalm 27

Luke 13

I want to make it clear that the sermon title today is false advertising: “Wandering Without Fear” – that’s simply not possible for us – it’s not true that you can live without fear; it’s not true, but it is Truth – with a capital T. That’s the sermon today – ‘Wandering Without Fear’ is not true, but it is Truth. That’s the end of the sermon – now for the beginning and middle.

In Genesis 15 the word of the LORD comes to Abram in a vision – ‘do not be afraid’; Psalm 27 proclaims this word: “the LORD is my light and salvation – who shall I fear? The LORD is my stronghold – of whom shall I be afraid?” Well, can you think of times when you have been afraid? – I’m sure you can, just as I can – so were those failures of faith, such fear? And of course we’re not talking about a scary movie kind of scared or a big rollercoaster kind of frightened or a big spider kind of fear – we’re talking about moments in life of losing bearings about yourself and others and God; frightened about life, health, security, future. Although when I start to think about it, it’s really quite a challenge to say exactly what kind of fear is being spoken to in that scripture today – the LORD saying ‘don’t be afraid’ – the Psalmist saying ‘with the LORD I will not be afraid’ – what is that talking about?

So I tried to think when I have truly been afraid in my life – not just scary movie scared - it’s an interesting exercise to go through if you want to try it. I was afraid as a child when I was mugged a couple of times on my paper route, beaten up. I was afraid when my first daughter Anna was being born and I wasn’t sure if she would survive childbirth. I was afraid during the day of September 11, 2001. I was afraid when I got divorced. I was afraid when I slid through an intersection on the snow into the path of a truck. I was afraid when teenage daughters weren’t home on time; I’m afraid when my wife isn’t back when I expect on a rainy night. I have been

afraid sometimes in my life walking or driving or being in places and at times I wasn't sure about my safety.

And as I listen to my fears, a lot of what I hear has to do with concern for security for myself and those closest to me – sometimes safety, sometimes a sense of stability and identity, sometimes life and death – and I suppose what runs through it all too is a deep sense of and fear about my own mortality, and that of those I love and care about. That's what I hear there in my fear.

It's a challenge to try to listen to, identify my fears - but then I tried something else, which I think is more difficult yet: I tried to listen to fears that were not mine – to see what others fears people might have – fears of people like you that I know, and fears of others, of people I don't know at all. And as I do that, I realize all I can really do is wonder, wonder what it is like:

- What is it like to have a spouse who is ill, a child whose health has been struck down? to have a spouse or a child die? To face life with that anxiety or emptiness? What is it like to feel alone?
- What is it like to wonder if your child will have enough to eat – to know there will not be enough? or not to know if you will have a place to call home, or if the place you are living is safe? What is it like to be in a place where there is war and violence every day – to have a bomb drop down on your city, yesterday, and today and tomorrow?
- What is it like to be a black man and to be stopped in your car by a police officer – or a black teenage boy called over by an officer on the street and to be afraid of what might happen? To have done nothing wrong but to know that may not matter; or to have done something wrong and know that may matter too much? What's it like to be a police officer, placed on the razor's edge of life and death for self and others?
- What's it like to be a refugee, when to stay home is not safe and to seek a new home is to risk your life? What is it like to be live in a town and feel an influx of refugees changing everything, and being unsure of your own ability to work and live into a good future?
- What is it like to know that because of your sexual orientation or identity, that people you love might reject you, or people you do not know may hate you?

- What's it like to have made a mistake, and to be in prison, and there to see and endure things no human should – and then to know that once you are out of prison that there are few prospects for you?
- What's it like to know your baby has been drinking water with lead in it?
- What's it like to be a child, but to not be safe in your own home at the hands of those who should care for you?

That is a sobering thing to do – to try to listen to the fears around me; perhaps most sobering because I realize that only touches the tip of the iceberg. But a few things occur to me as I try this difficult listening – I realize that there are people dealing with fears in this world that I can only begin to imagine; that as different as situations are, so much of fear has to do with wanting safety and security; and that fear has a lot of power in it, turning people to everything from despair to violence, driving people both together and apart.

So I realize I've been talking a lot about fear and not much about the Bible; and that where I did leave off with the Bible is wondering about what that word of 'not being afraid' is about in Genesis and the Psalm. But I'm going to get back to the Bible another way by turning to the Gospel story – that story about Jesus and the word coming to him that Herod wants to kill him – and Jesus says: 'Go and tell that fox that I am going about my work, God's work; and I will go to Jerusalem to complete that work.' and then Jesus says: 'Jerusalem, even as you reject the prophets, how I long to gather you like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.' That is a strange passage – I love this passage! I so want to hear Jesus voice as he speaks: 'Go and tell that fox...' because I think Jesus is SO mad here – I think he is seething at Herod – why? because Herod is a purveyor of fear; fear is Herod's currency and calling card. And Herod is brutally effective and successful, and Herod will play a part in taking Jesus' life. But Jesus says this to Herod, to fear: 'You tell that fox, you tell fear, I am going to keep doing my work, God's healing work, that is what is in charge of my life.' And then, suddenly with great tenderness, Jesus speaks of how he longs to gather wayward Jerusalem to him like a mother hen.

So here's what I think this story has to do with this fear-full sermon I have offered to you today. As people of faith who listen for the word of the LORD - who see in God's light and salvation the strength for true life – at the heart of our calling is neither to live our lives controlled by fear nor to be purveyors of fear. And do you see the two sides of that coin so powerfully given to us in this story of our Lord? On the one hand there is this righteous indignation Jesus has toward the powers of this world that deal in fear. As people of faith it is our calling to stand up to the currency of fear when it seeks center stage in us as individuals or community, as church or society, in political discourse or theological declaration – fear that inevitably diminishes and divides, denigrates and destroys. We do not deal in fear but in calling, we do not deal in security but in healing and hope, we do not deal in survival but in life – we are called in hope by the God of life.

And then at the same time, we with our Lord share in a deep compassion for the fears that do hold too many in this world too tightly; we share in Jesus' compassion for this world – a hen wanting to shelter her brood, our Lord says. There are far too many situations near and far in which the brokenness and fear does not go away; and to open our eyes to such brokenness softens us to always be people first of compassion, of grace, of peace. It calls me first to try to understand others fears, rather than simply protect myself from my own – which calls our lives to be about the work of Jesus: 'today and tomorrow and the next day, I must be on my way' our Lord says – the way of healing that enters into the places of fear in our world.

That was the beginning and middle, which brings us back to the end, and the false advertising: "Wandering Without Fear". It is not true that you can live without fear – that is far too true for so many in our world today – but it is true that we do not have to make fear our currency or our calling. The Truth is that our Lord has wandered into this world to do the healing work of God, to gather the brood of this world under God's wings; and we follow our Lord not for security and survival, but for healing and life. Let us gather at the table to be nourished in that calling.

AMEN