

## *When Fear Contracts, the Spirit Expands*

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: 1 Kings 8. 22-30, 41-43;  
Psalm 84;  
Ephesians 6.10-20;  
John 6.56-69

Human fear is a powerful force. We all know the stories of incredible feats of strength or speed fueled by adrenaline. We now know that in addition to fight or flight there is a freeze response where the body just shuts down in total paralysis in the face of certain kinds of trauma. When I say that fear contracts, I suspect most of us can pull on some body memory of muscles getting tighter, breath growing shallow, and the field of vision or focus closing in so that all we can see, and hear, and feel is the perception of threat and a rising panic to make it stop. There is of course a myriad of ways that this innate fear response serves us by keeping us safe and alive. We wouldn't be here as a human race without it.

But it also makes us vulnerable to manipulation. Just look at the way advertising and politics have learned to leverage those responses to make us willing consumers or to influence our vote. Those who can make us afraid hold tremendous power over us.

I learned recently about yet one more aspect of how fear can limit our vision. There was a study that was published in the journal *Science* almost exactly five years ago this week<sup>1</sup> even though I just heard about a couple of weeks ago. It was about the impact of poverty on what they called your "cognitive load" which refers to the amount of mental energy you can expend. It's a fascinating study. They conducted the study on shoppers in NJ and sugar cane farmers in India. They tested the decision making of the farmers just before the harvest when they were financially strained and after the harvest when they were financially flush. In both groups they found the same thing: The fear that comes from not having enough was equivalent to losing 13 IQ points. Our ability to

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<sup>1</sup> You can read the study at this link: <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/341/6149/976>

both see the big picture and then act in ways that get us there is incredibly limited when we are afraid.

If you look at this whole picture about how fear operates, it very clear that the perception of threat seems to drive so much of the tribalism that fuels division and violence. The moment you perceive a threat and define someone or something as the enemy, fear kicks in and all the contraction that comes with it. Which is why I have always felt the language of spiritual warfare was so unhelpful because it puts you into the contracted of fear. The last time I preached on these texts I shared with you the experience of being on staff in a large church doing youth ministry in college when the book series “This Present Darkness” was popular. They were all about spiritual warfare which was language I heard all over that congregation. They loved passages like this one from Ephesians that draws on military imagery - the armor of God - the battle with the devil. I am aware that my aversion to passages like this one from Ephesians comes from that time.

When you feel yourself under threat - which the church was experiencing at the time this letter from Ephesians was circulating - it makes sense that you pull from those images that the world has taught us to trust when we are afraid. Images of enemy and weaponry.

Walter Wink did incredible work reclaiming these images. I just realized it was the same time frame as those novels in the late 80s and early 90s. He re-envisioned this imagery we have from scripture about the powers and principalities. Not seeing these as supernatural forces of evil but looking instead at the cumulative force and ethos and spirituality that animates the structures of power that operate in our world. That is what he defined as the powers and principalities.

There is no question that evil exists in this world and that harm and destruction can invade any and all spheres of life. And it can take on a life of its own and seep into the air we breathe. We've seen that invasion in the church; it has been writ large in recent days. It's inevitable when you feel yourself under attack to look for the tools to fight or flee or hide. The church at the time Ephesians was being circulated was feeling threatened; it was fragmenting and pulling apart. So the author pulls on the images we know from the contracted places of fear: the perception of threat, the defining of enemy, the armor of weaponry.

What's interesting is that the vision here is an expansive one about standing firm. And while the images are drawn from weaponry, the actual tools of this so-called "armor of God" are given to help us not to fight or freeze or flee but to face what scares us or threatens us. The tools are things like truth, and righteousness, to find whatever it takes to proclaim the good news of peace. We are told to let our faith (our trust in God) and our understanding of salvation guide us: this wholistic vision of shalom given to us about how to be in relationship to each other, with God, in this world. This vision of life we learn from God's Word these are the things that will help us when the world is closing in and our minds are shutting down. Which, by the way, is why we do this together. So that if one of us is in the contraction of fear and getting ready for battle hopefully the Spirit is working in some other place opening up and expanding the vision.

In the passage from 1 Kings today, as Solomon is dedicating the temple, he recognizes that it is the nature of God to expand beyond any limits we might try to place on the divine. He establishes the temple as a place for God's name; a place that will be the sign and symbol of God's presence with them.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us in his commentary that the whole enterprise is a bit of a mixed bag. It's also a place that will bolster Solomon's political power. It's a place that was built with questionable integrity with the forced labor that brought his grand vision to fruition. The affluence that it represents with its cedar acquired from international trade agreements will be questioned by the fire of the prophets in later years. Just read Jeremiah 22.<sup>2</sup>

Churches from the beginning have been a mixed bag: a place that aspires to bring us to honor and love God and grow into our best selves but is also a place where we inevitably act out of our sinful and broken ways. In the midst of this temple dedication that lifts up the best of our aspirations but also reveals the worst of our human impulses – there is this profound truth of God's freedom that Solomon speaks when he says: "even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Kings, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 79.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 8.27, NRSV

God cannot be contained. God is free and expansive, alive and at work throughout the entirety of creation and beyond it. As people of faith are so prone to do, Israel has often interpreted their special place as the people of God in very narrow and exclusive terms; resorting to the kind of tribalism and rivalry that is alive and well in the Christian church today. But somehow despite all of that in this prayer of dedication Solomon envisions even the “foreigner” worshipping God in truth.

This verse reminds me of several lines from the RCA confession written in 1978 called *Our Song of Hope* which invites us to profess: “God has not been left without a witness. The Word has entered where we have failed to go...Christ’s hand reaches out beyond those who say “Lord” to the infants who live in the atmosphere of faith, even to the farthest stars and planets- all creation. The boundaries of God’s love are not known, the Spirit works at the ends of the world before the church has there spoken a word.”<sup>4</sup>

I know it’s the kids going back to school along with the educators in our midst, but we are the brink of new program year in the life of the church. You can feel that we are on the cusp of changing seasons. Even if there is nothing in your day to day life that is changing let’s just borrow the opportunity that every new morning gives us to turn the page.

Let’s breathe deep and take in this truth about the expansive and free nature of God’s Spirit.

I pray that you will have an encounter with God in this space and in this time.

As you leave, go with a posture of expectation.

The promise is that wherever we go, God’s Spirit will go with us – in fact before us – hearing our prayer, heeding our deep need, forgiving us when fail and fall, and helping us to get back up and face whatever comes.

So with that spirit of expectation, let us give thanks to God!

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<sup>4</sup> To read the full confession: <https://www.rca.org/resources/our-song-hope>